

The Cosmopolitan Circumnavigator of the South Seas: A Biography of Georg Forster

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2020

POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

Jovanović, Lazar, 2020. "The Cosmopolitan Circumnavigator of the South Seas: A Biography of Georg Forster", in *Bérose - Encyclopédie internationale des histoires de l'anthropologie*, Paris.

URL Bérose : [article1807.html](https://www.berose.fr/article1807.html)

BEROSE Publisher: ISSN 2648-2770

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Visited on 19 April 2024 at 02:15

Publié dans le cadre du thème de recherche «Histoire de l'anthropologie et des ethnologies allemandes et autrichiennes», dirigé par Jean-Louis Georget (Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris), Hélène Ivanoff (Institut Frobenius, recherches en anthropologie culturelle, Francfort-sur-le-Main), Isabelle Kalinowski (CNRS, Laboratoire Pays germaniques UMR 8547, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris) Richard Kuba (Institut Frobenius, recherches en anthropologie culturelle, Francfort-sur-le-Main) et Céline Trautmann-Waller (Université Sorbonne nouvelle-Paris 3/IUF).

In my opinion, my famous teacher and friend Georg Forster was the writer that most strongly and successfully pioneered a new approach to the literature in our homeland (*Vaterland*). With him a new era of scientific expeditions began with the goal of comparative ethnology (*Völkerkunde*) and regional geography (*Länderkunde*).

Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos* (1874)

The eighteenth-century German traveller and ethnographer Georg Forster (1754-1794) is well-known today for his participation in James Cook's (1728-1779) second expedition [1] (1772-75) and for the influential travelogue *A Voyage Round the World* (1777) that emerged as a result from the three-year exploration of the South Seas. Vivid and rich in anthropological insights, the three-volume travelogue was to a great extent based upon travel reports and daily records made by Georg Forster's father Johann Reinhold Forster (1729-1798), and enriched with Georg's first-hand experience during the encounters with South Pacific societies. Although the book can be regarded as a co-authored work, Georg Forster's extended ethnographic accounts complemented the records made by his father, enhancing it in style, and therewith making it more appealing to a wider readership. Consequently, its publication rapidly earned him fame and recognition within German academic circles at the time, and

posthumously the status of the founding father of German (scientific) travel literature.

Throughout his short but restless life, Georg Forster was simultaneously yet devotedly occupied with writing, translating, editing, teaching and revolutionary politics, leaving notable contributions in every one of these spheres. Travel literature, then the second most popular literary genre in Europe, was actually revolutionized by Forster, as one of the rare representatives of this field who personally experienced travelling overseas, which is of a particular significance in and for the context of the eighteenth-century German-speaking countries which at the time did not have any colonies outside Europe. Georg Forster's numerous writings and respectable reviews of various travelogues of his time [2] were published in journals and magazines such as *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*, *Göttingisches Historisches Magazine*, and *Allgemeine Litteraturzeitung*, to name just a few. Many of his extensive writings engaged the heated debates on then current issues with the leading figures of the eighteenth-century German-speaking scholarship, such as Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Christoph Meiners (1747-1810). Mention should be made as well of his contributions to *Neue Beiträge zur Völker- und Länderkunde*, [3] a journal that Forster co-edited with the geographer and historian Matthias Christian Sprengel (1746-1803).

Even at the age of thirteen, Georg Forster had paved a career for himself as a successful and profitable translator, namely by translating Mikhail Lomonosov's (1711-1765) historical account of Russia in 1767, and not even into his native German, but into English. As might be expected, not long after its original English publication in 1777, *A Voyage Round the World* was translated by its author into German between 1778-80, and published in two volumes under the title *Reise um die Welt*. Another noteworthy translation Georg Forster carried out is the German translation of a Latin example of *Śakuntalā*, [4] which has left a profound impact on both the public and Forster's personal interest in Hinduism, and consequently, on the later rise of German philological studies of non-European languages (s. Gingrich 2005).

Outside the scientific realm, but not entirely detached from it, Georg Forster's tempestuous political life prompted Friedrich Engels to label him "the German Thomas Paine" (Lepenies 1980, 396), while Claus Träger (1962, 630; Lepenies 1980, 396) accurately described him as a "national revolutionary, without a revolutionary nation", since Georg Forster was an ardent sympathizer of the French Revolution. In 1793 Forster acted as a co-founder of the Mainz Republic and editor of *Die Neue Mainzer Zeitung*, the revolutionary newspaper of the short-lived republic. Declared an outlaw, he died as one in exile in Paris, loyal to his revolutionary ideals in the face of the Reign of Terror.

Somewhat paradoxically, Forster's political views emanated from his ethnographic work and experience acquired during the three-year voyage (Goldstein 2019). And yet, according to Erwin H. Ackerknecht (1955), the consequences of Forster's political decisions had an enormous impact on his reputation both throughout his life -as his popularity gradually dwindled towards the end of his life -and posthumously, when his political views and acts served as a prism through which the assessment of his scientific attainments had been carried out. Thus, it is no wonder that Forster's immense and influential contributions to

anthropology in its formative period, chiefly through his unprecedented approach to *Völkerbeschreibung* [5] (ethnography) as a travel writer, had gone largely unnoticed up until the mid-20th century when Forster's notable work was rediscovered.

In the studies of Mühlmann (1948) and Ackerknecht (1955; s. also Gingrich 2005; Enzensberger 1979; Steiner 1977), Georg Forster is justifiably acknowledged as an important predecessor in the history of anthropology, if not the father of the modern German *Völkerkunde* (ethnology) (Karyekar 2013), and thus recognized as an anticipator of certain trends within the later development of the discipline. Comparably, Wolf Lepenies (1980), by adopting a similar position, points out Forster's underestimated role in the early formative period of the discipline, and demonstrates that there was a tradition of Forsterian anthropology worthy of that name.

Georg Forster designated his prime field of interest as "natural science in the broadest sense and, in particular, anthropology" (Lepenies 1980, 396; Uhlig 2004). Moreover, his anthropological work, like most of similar works of his time, encompassed a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from botany, zoology and geography, to travel, philosophy and aesthetics. An advocate of the early "multidisciplinarity" and the holism it entailed, that is, the project of "all-embracing anthropology" (Heine-Geldner 1964, 407), typical of eighteenth-century scholarship, he strongly opposed the differentiation of sciences, which ultimately took place in the following century. Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), a self-proclaimed pupil, friend and admirer of Georg Forster, who along with his older brother Wilhelm (1767-1835) adopted Forster's approach, describes the adopted research outlook:

(...) Georg Forster first depicted the elegance of changing vegetation, climatic relations, the nutrients in relation to the ethos and people through the diversity of their original dwellings and their origin."
(Humboldt 1874, 72)

As such, Forster ostensibly fits into the image of a genuine eighteenth-century naturalist – an overseas explorer, observer and cataloguer of faraway cultures, their customs and environmental conditions, with the purpose of presenting peculiarities of alien cultures often pervaded by fiction [6] to the curious European public. However, in *A Voyage Round the World* Forster offers a novel perspective on "morals, customs, and manners" (*Sitten und Gebräuche*) of faraway societies. Described by the author as a "philosophical travel account" (*Philosophische Reisebeschreibung*), *A Voyage Round the World*, unlike travel literature of its time, provides ethnographical accounts with a strong adherence to the ideal of cultural impartiality. According to Forster, this entailed a non-partisan (*unparteiisch*) and unbiased view on other cultures, as objective as possible, liberated from one's own cultural background and value system, while simultaneously cognizant of its limits. Adhering to this ideal, Georg Forster developed and embraced a specific relativistic understanding of non-European societies, wedded with cultural pluralism and a cosmopolitan view, leaving a valuable contribution for future generations of German-speaking ethnologists and anthropologists (Buschmann 2007). As Susanne Zantop (1997, 33) remarks, "If we are to judge

by the travelogues published, the number of Germans who travelled to the New World in the eighteenth century – or who found something interesting to tell – was minuscule.”

The Development of Georg Forster's Thought: The First Expedition, A Voyage Round the World and Academic Life

Georg Forster was born on 27th November, 1754 in a small village near Gdańsk (Danzig), Nassenhuben, today known as Mokry Dwór, located in the northern part of the present-day Republic of Poland, then a territory of Royal Prussia. The son of Johann Reinhold Forster, a naturalist, linguist, and pastor in Nassenhuben and Justina Elisabeth, née Nikolai (c.1726- c.1806), Johann Reinhold's cousin from Marienwerder (today Kwidzyn), Georg was the oldest of the seven children (Ackerknecht 1955; Lepenies 1980; Uhlig 2004). Before becoming a pastor in Nassenhuben, the father had studied languages and natural history in Berlin and theology at the University of Halle, occasionally attending lectures in medicine (Uhlig 2004). From an early age, under the influence, encouragement and mentorship of his father, the young Forster acquired basic knowledge in natural history, arithmetic, Latin and French. His father played a crucial role in Georg's upbringing and intellectual development (ibid), and up until their return from the voyage with Captain Cook, one could not separate their life narratives.

And so, as a boy of barely eleven, Georg Forster received the opportunity to gain research experience in the field and further his education when his father was invited by the Russian empress Catherine II (Catherine the Great, 1729-1796) to conduct a research expedition in 1765 (Craig 1969). The prosperous reign of the empress began with settling underdeveloped regions along the Volga river, where Johann Reinhold Forster was commissioned to inspect the living conditions and natural environment among the newly settled German colonies (Volga Germans) on the riverbanks of the Volga (Uhlig 2004; Craig 1969). As his father's assistant and apprentice during the long journey to the colonies located in Saratov province and the sojourn there, the young Forster acquired a basic knowledge of the Russian language and the rudiments of cartography (Lepenies 1980). In addition, as Johann Reinhold Forster's meticulous research led him to the discovery of several new plant species (Forster 2000, xix), his son was also introduced to botany, broadening and strengthening his interest in natural history. More precisely, the young Forster, influenced by his father's naturalist perspective, developed an interest in the connection of inhabitants to their respective environments (Craig 1969, 3), which would later become the foundation of his approach, so praised by the Humboldt brothers. The father and son spent the following year in St. Petersburg, waiting for payment for the research undertaken, where the former was occupied with the preparation and editing of his research reports for the Russian government, while the latter attended his only formal education in a secondary school in the city, perfecting his Russian language to the level of fluency (Uhlig 2004, 26), as his first translation from Russian into English was to prove in the following year.

Although in many respects the sojourn in Russia had a lasting effect and crucial significance in Georg Forster's subsequent life and career, it had an unfortunate epilogue. His father was

deprived of the promised salary because the reports were highly critical of the governors' conduct towards colonists in the Russian provinces where the Forsters had undertaken the research (Lepenies 1980, 399). Meanwhile, Johann Reinhold lost his ministry in his hometown, as he had overstayed his leave in Russia while occupied with the research. Compelled by his precarious situation, he travelled to London in 1766, accompanied by his son, and decided to stay in England, followed by the rest of the family a year later. This precarious living situation continued after they settled in the new country, in spite of Georg Forster's indefatigable work as a translator and a teaching post his father obtained at the Warrington Dissenters' Academy in Lancashire as a lecturer in languages and natural history (Forster 2000, xix; Uhlig 2004). Known as a man of quarrelsome temper, Johann Reinhold could not retain his post at the academy, and was forced to make living by doing translation together with his son. These translations included works of Louis Antoine de Bougainville (1729-1811) and Pehr Kalm (1716-1779), which not only additionally sparked Georg's interest in travel, botany, and natural history, but also helped him strengthen and expand his knowledge of different languages, such as Dutch, French, and Swedish (Uhlig 2004); in that moment this was a valuable skill which maintained the meagre subsistence of the Forster family. However, what began as an unfortunate event which pressured the father and son into moving to England, bringing financial uncertainties to the family, was soon to turn out to be a turning point in the lives of both Forsters.

In 1770 and 1771 the father published two works, *A Catalogue of British Insects* and *A Catalogue of the Animals of North America* respectively, which helped to establish him as an eminent naturalist, a commendation which in 1772 secured him a fellowship in the Royal Society. In the meantime, public attention was turned towards the widespread speculations concerning the existence of a supposed continent in the South Pacific – *Terra Australis Incognita*. In order to determine its existence, the Admiralty began preparation for an expedition and commissioned Captain James Cook, who had arrived from his first great voyage just a year before. Initially, the famous British naturalist Joseph Banks (1743-1820), who accompanied Captain Cook on the previous voyage, had been appointed as scientist onboard. However, luckily for Forsters, Bank's demands for the journey did not meet with approval from the British Admiralty, leading to the withdrawal of his permission to sail. By virtue of his reputation in the Royal Society, Johann Reinhold Forster received the invitation to join the expedition, after an influential friend Daines Barrington (c.1727-1800), a fellow naturalist and lawyer, then a Vice President of the Royal Society, vouched for his eligibility as a naturalist, and nominated Forster as a competent candidate. The Society bargained with Forster senior for an official account of the voyage upon their return, written in the naturalist, "philosophical" fashion, that is, a travel narrative not only based on common naturalist observations of flora and fauna of potentially newly discovered lands, but also on observations of "the nature" of their respective inhabitants. In the preface of *A Voyage Round the World*, Georg Forster expounds the expectations of the British Society (Forster 2000 [1777], 5-6):

The British legislature did not send out and liberally support my father as

a naturalist, who was merely to bring home a collection of butterflies and dried plants (...) So far from prescribing rules for his conduct, they conceived that the man whom they had chosen, prompted by his natural love of science, would endeavour to derive the greatest possible advantages to learning from his voyage. He was only therefore directed to exercise all his talents, and to extend his observations to every remarkable object. From him they expected a philosophical history of the voyage, free from prejudice and vulgar error, where human nature should be represented without any adherence to fallacious systems, and upon the principles of general philanthropy; in short, an account written upon a plan which the learned world had not hitherto seen executed.

Once again, Forster senior brought along his son, then a seventeen-year-old, who was appointed as a draughtsman and the father's personal assistant. They embarked and set the sail on the *Resolution* - a vessel purchased by the Royal Navy solely for the purposes of the expedition - in the summer of 1772 from the bay of Plymouth for the three-year journey.

Although the predictions of the existence of a new habitable Great Southern Continent in the South Pacific eventually proved to be incorrect, the journey is considered to be one of the greatest sea explorations, as it "had covered – taking all courses into account – a distance of more than three times the circumference of the earth" (Goldstein 2019, 22). The *Resolution* was the first ship to cross the Antarctic Circle in mid-January 1773, traversing it two more times during the voyage. Due to the harsh weather conditions, the ship sailed away north, and the crew arrived in New Zealand in March, before visiting and exploring Tahiti, Huahine, Raiatea, Hervey, [7] and the Tonga Islands during the following months (ibid). During their stay in Tahiti in August 1733, Forster offers one of his accounts on the encounter with the inhabitants of the island (Forster 2000 [1777], 144-5):

The people around us had mild features, and a pleasing countenance; they were about our size, of a pale mahogany brown, had fine black hair and eyes, and wore a piece of cloth round their middle of their own manufacture, and another wrapped about the head in various picturesque shapes like a turban. Among them were several females (...) These wore a piece of cloth with a hole in the middle, through which they had passed the head, so that one part of the garment hung down behind, and the other before, to the knees; a fine white cloth like a muslin, was passed over this in various elegant turns round the body, a little below the breast, forming a kind of tunic, of which one turn sometimes fell gracefully across the shoulder. If this dress had not entirely that perfect form, so justly admired in the draperies of the ancient Greek statues, it was however infinitely superior to our expectations, and much more advantageous to the human figure, than any modern fashion we had hitherto seen. Both sexes were adorned, or rather disfigured, by those singular black stains, occasioned by puncturing the skin, and rubbing a black colour into the wounds, which are mentioned by former voyagers (...) Many of them seeing us desirous of learning their language, by asking the names of various familiar objects, or repeating such as we found in the vocabularies of former voyagers, took great pains to teach us, and were much delighted when we could catch the just pronunciation of a word. For my own part, no language seemed easier to acquire than this;

every harsh and sibilant consonant being banished from it, and almost every word ending in a vowel. The only requisite, was a nice ear to distinguish the numerous modification of their vowels, which must naturally occur in a language confined to few consonants, and which, once rightly understood, give a great degree of delicacy to conversation.



Johann Reinhold Forster and His Son Georg Forster on Tahiti

John Francis Riguard, 1780

(Collection: National Portrait Gallery, Canberra;
Purchased with funds provided by the Liangis family,
the Ian Potter Foundation and John Schaeffer AO
2009)

In November they departed for the second voyage towards the South Pole in search of the Great Continent, but they were forced by the thick floating ice and cold to turn the course north again. Forster recounts the difficulties of the journey in mid-December, 1773 (Forster 2000 [1777], 288):

The weather, which was already foggy, became thicker towards noon, and made our situation, amidst a great number of floating rocks of ice, extremely dangerous. About one o'clock, whilst the people were at dinner, we were alarmed by the sudden appearance of a large island of ice just a head of us. It was absolutely impossible either to wear or track the ship, on account of its proximity, and our only resource was to keep as near the wind as possible, and to try to weather the danger. We were in the most dreadful suspense for a few minutes, and though we fortunately succeeded, yet the ship passed within her own length to windward from it. Notwithstanding the constant perils to which our course exposed us in this unexplored ocean, our ship's company were far from being so uneasy as might have been expected; and, as in battle the sight of death becomes familiar and often unaffecting, so here, by daily experiencing such hair-breadth escapes, we passed unconcernedly on, as if the waves, the winds, and rocks of ice had not the power to hurt us. The pieces of ice had a variety of shapes (...) Their height was not much inferior to that which we had observed among the first islands of ice in 1772; and many likewise resembled them in being of a great extent and perfectly level at top.

A couple of months later, in mid-March 1774, the *Resolution* reached the Eastern Islands, returning to Tahiti already in April, from where the expedition continued, firstly towards Fiji, “sailing the course through Huahine, Raiatea, and the northern Tonga Islands” (Goldstein 2019, 22), leading them to an island previously uncharted, which Cook named New Caledonia. In the early September, Forster documents the arrival at the island and encounter with its inhabitants (Forster 2000 [1777], 563-5):

On the 4th of September, about seven in the morning, a midshipman at the masthead discovered land to the south, extending a great way to the westward, and likewise to the south-eastward. It appeared to be very high, and its distance from us was about eight leagues, being seen through a haze, which made it appear farther off than it really was (...) A calm, which happened after noon, entirely stopped our progress towards the land, to which we were now near enough to discern several smokes, sufficient to prove that it was inhabited (...) The whole land, appearing to be very extensive, was honoured with the appellation of *Nova Caledonia*. We could not wait the moment which should bring us acquainted with the inhabitants of this land, but formed several conjectures relative to them (...) Early the next morning, having a fine breeze, we stood towards the shore, and soon discovered the reef (...) Within it we saw several canoes, each provided with two large sails, one behind the other, and some natives on board of them employed in fishing. A few other canoes put off from the shore sometime after, and, passing the reef, came towards the ship. We called to them as soon as we could be heard, but they only looked at us, and soon returned the way they came, making however no unfriendly gestures (...) Lieutenant Pickersgill, who had been out in the boat, now returned on board, and told us that the people in the canoes had been extremely friendly towards him, and shewed him one of their number whom they named *Teà-booma*, and stiled their *arèkeke*, or king. He gave him some medals and other trifles, and likewise presented the other people in the canoe with the same; but they all delivered what they received immediately into the hands of *Teà-booma*. Mr. Pickersgill brought on board four or five fish, of which these good people had made him a present.

After the short stay in New Caledonia, the expedition continued towards New Zealand, which they reached in the mid-October, from where they sailed across the South Pacific “without making a single stop” (Goldstein 2019, 22) on their way to South Africa. Soon after rounding Cape Horn and entering the South Atlantic in late December 1774, the crew spotted and documented South Georgia and the Sandwich Islands. They reached the shores of South Africa in late March 1775, and arrived in England at the end of July that year.

Over the course of the journey, Johann Reinhold’s temper came with a price again. During the voyage, he continuously complained about the conditions with regard to accommodation, and above all, the indifference of Cook, for whom allegedly “the study of nature had always been considered a matter of secondary importance” (Forster quoted in Lepenies 1980, 397). These complaints culminated throughout the journey, and upon their return were concluded by a decision according to which Johann Reinhold was deprived of rights to write and publish the requested account under his name before the official one was

published, now entrusted to Captain Cook. Free of any contractual obligations towards the Society or Admiralty, and encouraged by his father, Georg Forster, relying mostly on the father's journal, started writing the book in the summer of 1776, and in the following nine months, wrote around 1,200 pages of text (Forster 2000, xxviii), publishing it six weeks before James Cook's official volume.

Initially, *A Voyage Round the World* was not a great success in Britain, given the reputation of the author of the competing official account (Zhang 2013, 264). However, Forster's reflexive and detailed ethnographical observations, rich in description and occasional "theoretical interpretations" (Mühlmann quoted in Lepenies 1980, 398) proved to be more tempting than Cook's dull prose, which ultimately won the attention of wider readership and brought the twenty-two-year-old Forster international fame and recognition, and thus a firm place among the German intelligentsia, as well as within wider European academic circles. Accordingly, in the year of the publication of his travelogue, Georg, like his father before him, was rewarded with fellowship of the Royal Society. Notwithstanding the popularity and recognition which both Forsters enjoyed upon their return and publication of the travelogue, their financial situation remained unaltered. To ameliorate it, Georg Forster travelled to Paris, where he tried to arrange the French edition of *A Voyage Round the World*; however, these attempts failed, so the young Forster returned to England and in an agreement with the father, sold most of his botanical drawings from the expedition to Joseph Banks. Once again, the Forsters were forced to move.



Georg Forster's drawings

Characteres generum plantarum, quas in itinere ad insulas maris Australis, collegerunt, descripserunt, delinearunt, annis MDCCLXXII-MDCCLXXV. Joannes Reinoldus Forster ... et Georgius Forster, 1775

(Available at: <http://access.bl.uk>)

Decision to return to the German principalities simultaneously marked the end of the close collaboration between the father and son and the beginning of their independent academic careers. Their successful reception in academia was profoundly influenced by their participation in Cook's expedition and the resulting book which in return was to have an enormous impact on the then still unformed discipline of anthropology.

In retrospect, significance the journey had for anthropology surpassed the geographical contributions anticipated by the primary intent of the expedition. In other words, the existence of the speculated landmass was ultimately refuted, while “Forsters’ collections of ethnographic objects [brought back from the expedition] lay the early foundations of what were to become several anthropology museums in continental Europe” (Gingrich 2005, 66), in addition to the influential and “outstanding observations which still can serve as a model for modern ethnography” (Mühlmann quoted in Lepenies 1980, 398) contained in *A Voyage Round the World*.

Back in their home country, with the help of his son, Johann Reinhold Forster obtained a professorship in natural history and mineralogy at the University of Halle, and directorship of the University’s botanical garden, where he stayed until his death in 1798. Georg’s erratic academic career began with a professorship in natural history at Collegium Carolinum in Kassel in 1778 (Craig 1969; Lepenies 1980; Uhlig 2004). With the new vocation, Georg Forster did not give up on his old passion and now an additional profession, as “between 1780 and 1793, he translated, edited or wrote introductions to at least fifteen travel books” (Tzoref-Askenazi 2010, 4), constantly yearning for new travels overseas. However, he never left Europe again.

During the six-year period spent in Kassel, Forster established firm connections with the leading figures of the German-speaking scholarly circles, mostly with scholars from the University of Göttingen, the cradle of German *Völkerkunde*, and at the time the leading, if not the first anthropological centre in Europe (Ackerknecht 1955; cf. Vermeulen 1995; 2015). In his correspondence with various scholars, and due to the successful reception of his work, Forster extended his influence over the boundaries of what was to become German *Volkskunde* and *Völkerkunde*, and thus outside strictly academic circles. Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813), a German poet and writer, also a friend of Georg Forster, inspired by *A Voyage Round the World* and its author’s character and adventurous spirit, “conceived the protagonist of his novel *Geschichte der Abderiten* ... as a travelling philosopher who explores human diversity” (Zhang 2013, 265). Likewise, Forster’s rich and plentiful descriptions of the Polynesian island Tahiti stimulated the Romantic primitivism and sentimentalism, even if it was already noticeable in the work of his contemporary, Christian Cay Lorenz Hirschfeld (1742-1792), a garden theorist who “praised the natural garden Tahiti, in which no artificial planning disturbed the harmonious union of humans and nature” (ibid, 271).

In addition, Georg Forster secured his prominence through the critical evaluations of works by his contemporaries, including luminaries such as Immanuel Kant. In 1785 in the essay “Bestimmung des Begriffs einer Menschenrase”, Kant had criticized travel literature, questioning its epistemological authority, asserting that “travellers lack the faculty to understand what they see because they do not have clear ideas regarding what to look for” (Tzoref-Ashkenazi 2010, 4). Forster opposed Kant’s criticism by emphasizing the importance of the traveller’s personal experience, insisting on perceptive empirical observations, while arguing that “philosophers, who have only contemplated mankind in their closets” (Forster

quoted in Lepenies 1980, 410) ought to restrain themselves from value judgements, as they lack an empirical basis for it. Already elucidating his stand on the issue, Forster writes in the Preface of *A Voyage Round the World* (Forster 2000 [1777], 9):

Without being competent judges of the subject, they [the philosophers of the present age] have assumed a few circumstances as facts; and wresting even those to suit their own systems, have built a superstructure which pleases at distance, but upon nearer examination partakes of the illusive nature of a dream. The learned, at last grown tired of being deceived by the powers of rhetoric, and by sophistical arguments, raised a general cry after a simple collection of facts. They had their wish; facts were collected in all parts of the world, and yet knowledge was not increased. They received a confused heap of disjointed limbs, which no art could reunite into a whole; and the rage of hunting after facts soon rendered them incapable of forming and resolving a single proposition; like those minute enquirers, whose life is wholly spent in the anatomical dissection of flies, from whence they never draw a single conclusion for the use of mankind, or even of brutes.

From the same standpoint, Forster sharply criticized Christoph Meiner's racialist and hierarchical view on mankind expounded in his *Grundriß der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1785); namely, Forster maintained that "had Meiners himself visited the people he describes, the judgement he delivered would have been more philanthropic" (Forster quoted in Lepenies 1980, 409), stating further that "anthropology must 'consider each people for itself, ... describe it according to all its condition and ... investigate exactly just how it fits into the place that it occupies upon the earth'" (ibid, 410). In this passage, Forster also envisages the argument he will return to in a debate with Kant on the topic of race, arguing that skin colour is the product of the environment and climate, and not a criterion for race. For, Forster maintains, climate, and not race is the main determinant of peoples' physical appearance, character, and forms of socio-cultural organization. In his account of Tahitians, he writes (Forster 2000 [1777], 380-1):

This climate, and its salubrious productions, contribute to the strength and the elegance of their form. They are all well-proportioned, and some would have been selected by Phidias or Praxiteles, as models of masculine beauty. Their features are sweet, and unruffled by violent passions. Their large eyes, their arched eyebrows, and high forehead, give a noble air to their heads, which are adorned by strong beards, and a comely growth of hair. These, as well as their beautiful teeth, are the proofs of vigour, and of a sound habit of body (...) A kind of happy uniformity runs through the whole life of the Tahitians. They rise with the sun, and hasten to rivers and fountains, to perform an ablution equally reviving and cleanly. They pass the morning at work, or walk about till the heat of the day increases, when they retreat to their dwellings, or repose under some tufted tree. There they amuse themselves with smoothing their hair, and anoint it with fragrant oils; or they blow the flute, and sing to it, or listen to the songs of the birds. At the hour of noon, or a little later, they go to dinner. After their meals they resume their domestic amusements, during which the flame of mutual affection spreads in every heart, and unites the rising generation with new and tender ties. The lively jest, without any ill-

nature, the artless tale, the jocund dance and frugal supper, bring on the evening; and another visit to the river concludes the actions of the day.

In insisting on particular understanding of each culture, Forster, notwithstanding his polygenist persuasion, is much closer to the position of his friend and contemporary, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who embraced a mosaic vision of humanity, emphasizing its universal character expressed in its diversity of (cultural) forms, so that every form could only be understood in its own terms and as a product of its particular history. It is noteworthy that Forster's "writings both influenced and were influenced by Herder" (Sikka 2011, 26; s. Herder 2016). However, unlike Herder, Georg Forster favoured a polygenetic view of human origins, drawing to a great extent upon his comparative observations between inhabitants of what he and his father demarcated as Polynesian and Melanesian groups, which the Forsters depicted as two different races with distinct origin. Taking ethnological and linguistic data to corroborate his view, which went hand in hand with his cultural pluralism, Forster "arrived at the division of humankind ('the one human species') into seven categories he called 'exempla'" (Vermeulen 2015, 289).

From 1784, Forster held the chair in natural history at Vilnius University. In contrast to the period spent at the university in Kassel, which was intellectually stimulating, Forster's experience in Vilnius was filled with disappointments and isolation, notwithstanding his active and inspiring connection and correspondence with various scholars. Frustrated by the working conditions, and faced with failed promises for their amelioration, Forster terminated his contract after two years, initially signed for eight. In the meantime, he married Therese Heyne (1764-1829), Christian Gottlob Heyne's (1729-1812) daughter, who later became known as the first German female professional writer; however, the marriage did not last long. In 1785 while in Halle, Georg Forster was rewarded with a doctorate, for his work on the edible plants found on the South Pacific islands (Lepenies 1980, 401). Two years later, after the conclusion of the contract in Vilnius, he restored contact with Catherine the Great when the Russian empress approached him with an offer to join a Russian expedition to the Pacific, a plan never realized, due to the outbreak of conflict between Russia and the Ottoman Empire (1787-92).

However, Georg Forster was able to partly satisfy his longing for travel shortly thereafter. In 1788 together with his wife he settled in Mainz as a university librarian, where he befriended Alexander von Humboldt, who accompanied him on a journey through Germany, Netherlands, England, and France. The voyage was followed by Forster's second most popular publication, *Ansichten vom Niederrhein, von Brabant, Flandern, Holland, England und Frankreich im April, Mai und Juni 1790* (*Views of the Lower Rhine, from Brabant, Flanders, Holland, England, and France in April, May and June 1790*) whose style and richness in description parallel those found in *A Voyage Round the World*, as did its influence -the book deservedly received the high praise from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) (Berghof 2013, 454), while the young Humboldt acquired lasting influence from the time spent with Forster, which echoed through his monumental work. In July 1858, less

than a year prior to his death, Alexander von Humboldt wrote to the German author Heinrich König (1790-1869), after receiving a copy of König's book *Georg Forster's Leben in Haus und Welt* (*Georg Forster's Life at Home and Abroad*):

You have furnished a biography of my departed friend which (...) has kept me agreeably occupied for two long evenings. It has produced upon my mind many pleasing impressions, and many sad ones also. For the space of thirty years I have never known leisure but of an evening, and the half-century that I have spent in this ceaseless activity has been occupied in telling myself and others how much I owe to my teacher and friend George Forster in the generalization of my views on nature and in the strengthening and development of that which had already dawned in me before those happy days of intimate friendship. On these two evenings, as the current of my thoughts flow back to the past, and I reflected with sadness on the rapid deterioration of my powers, I was more than ever reminded of the remarkable resemblances and contrasts existing between Forster and myself; we held indeed the same political opinions, and mine, though in no way derived from Forster (...) were yet strengthened and matured under his influence; it was in company with him, the circumnavigator of the globe, that I first beheld the sea at a time when I had not the remotest expectation that I should myself only twelve years later be sailing in the Southern Ocean. (Humboldt in Löwenberg *et al.* 2012, 92-3)

In October 1792, French revolutionary troops occupied Mainz. Actively engaged in establishing the Mainz Republic, Forster advocated the incorporation of Mainz into the First Republic, and as a representative of the provisional government, he travelled to France in early 1793, to negotiate its realization. During his leave, Mainz succumbed after a siege laid by Prussian and Austrian troops, who ultimately recaptured it. Outlawed as a supporter of the Revolution, he was forced to stay in France, where he died after an illness, "thirty nine years old, in his hotel room in Paris, in the House of the Dutch Patriotism Rue des Moulins. On his bed blanket lay a map of India, the land of his longing, to which he soon wanted to travel" (Lepenies, 1980, 402).

Concluding remarks: Contours of Forsterian anthropology

Georg Forster's legacy as a travel writer and early pre-academic ethnographer is reflected in the cosmopolitan outlook on non-European societies he developed in *A Voyage Round the World*, and which he retained over the entire course of his academic career. Forster sharply and vocally condemns slavery, imperialism, and any other form of subjugation, and in Herderian fashion, embraces cultural pluralism, actively advocating unsuppressed individuality of each culture, while simultaneously maintaining the belief that "all humans share the same predispositions (*Anlagen*) for reason, feeling, and imagination" (Kleingeld 1999, 516), expressed differently in relation to their respective surroundings. In Forster's words:

What man [*der Mensch*] could become, he has everywhere become in accordance with the local conditions. Climate, location of towns, height of

mountains, direction of rivers, ... have sometimes favored him from one side, sometimes limited him from the another and influenced his physique as well as his moral behavior. In this way, he has nowhere become everything, but everywhere become something different (Forster quoted in *ibid*, 516).

Conversely, one can justifiably argue that Georg Forster (along with his father) was formally a member of the (British) colonial mission, by taking part in Cook's second voyage, especially with respect to Forster's opinion according to which contacts between Europeans and non-European societies can be beneficial for the latter, a view which he expounds already in the Preface of *A Voyage Round the World* (2000 [1777], 12):

(...) I cannot but observe, that considering the small expence at which voyages of discovery are carried on, the nation which favours these enterprizes is amply repaid by the benefit derived to our fellow-creatures. I cannot help thinking that our late voyage would reflect immortal honour on our employers, if it had no other merit than stocking Taheitee with goats, the Friendly Isles and New Hebrides with dogs, and New Zealand and New Caledonia with hogs. It is therefore sincerely to be wished, that voyages of discovery, upon a disinterested plan, may still be prosecuted with vigour, as much remains to be done, even in the South Sea; unless it should be in the power of illiberal men to defeat the great and generous views of a monarch, who is justly called the patron of science. A single remark, which may be of extensive use to posterity; a single circumstance, which may make happy our fellow-creatures in those remote parts of the world, repays the toils of the navigation, and bestows that great reward, the consciousness of good and noble actions.

The belief that European influence and overseas trade could lead towards improvements and further development of the South Pacific societies mirrored Forster's "vision of enlightened colonialism (...) driven by the spirit of reason and benevolence" in which he clearly "distinguished between colonial greed and enlightened curiosity" (Tzoref-Ashkenazi 2010, 20). In his account of the island Tanna, Forster (2000 [1777], 553-6) further elaborates his standpoint:

Tanna, thus well supplied by nature, and blessed with the mild influence of a tropical climate, contains a race of men in a much inferior state of civilization, than the natives of the Friendly and Society Islands, who live nearly in the same parallel (...) The people of Tanna do not appear (...) to be far advanced; their houses are mere sheds, which barely cover them from the inclemency of the weather. Dress, another distinguishing character of civilization, is as yet entirely unknown to them (...) Their behaviour to us at our first arrival, and the custom of eating human flesh, which their signs plainly indicated, is a proof that their passions are violent. The intercourse with Europeans might perhaps have proved to a benefit to them, and laid the ground-work for a future progress in civilization (...) as we left a considerable number of nails and some hatchets among them, the durability of the metal will soon teach them to hold it in high esteem, and it is not improbable that the next ship which may happen to visit them, will find them fond of iron-ware, and eager to barter provisions for it.

However, a violent incident with a Tannese man which ultimately claimed the man's life, pressured Forster to critically rethink his stand on the benevolence of the European presence among non-European societies. Reflecting on the incident, he writes (ibid, 505):

The levelling of a musket at them, or rather at their chief, provoked them to attack our crew. On our part this manœuvre was equally necessary; but it is much to be lamented that the voyages of Europeans cannot be performed without being fatal to the nations whom they visit.

Forster evinces his doubts concerning the effects of the European impact on the South Pacific societies earlier in his travelogue, in an account on his stay on the island of Tahiti (ibid, 168):

It were indeed sincerely to be wished, that the intercourse which has lately subsisted between Europeans and the natives of the South Sea islands may be broken off in time, before the corruption of manners which unhappily characterises civilized regions, may reach that innocent race of men, who live here fortunate in their ignorance and simplicity. But it is a melancholy truth, that the dictates of philanthropy do not harmonize with the political systems of Europe!

Yet, he does not succumb to the sentimentalist representation of the “noble savage”, [8] an idealized image often wedded with a developmentalist perspective of the Enlightenment ideology, as the above quotation and the overall tone of Forster's accounts of Tahiti may imply. In a response to a review of *A Voyage Round the World* in 1778 which criticized the abundance of “panegyrics to alien virtues” (Lepenies 1980, 417) noticeable in the travelogue, Forster “stressed that for him it was a matter of countering the prejudice that ‘we in Europe alone possess all virtue, and attribute to savages nothing but misdeeds and evil nature’”, arguing that he wanted to “show real virtues among savages, where in similar cases depravities reign among polished peoples” (ibid, 417). On the other hand, although Forster “espouses a normative theory of civilization oriented to the state of development of the most advanced European nations” (ibid 1980, 420), he does not, however, put forward the hierarchical relation between underdeveloped “savages” and progressive “civilized nations” of eighteenth-century Europe. “The passions of mankind are similar everywhere; the same instincts are active in the slave and the prince” (Forster 2000 [1777], 374), Forster contends. This stems from his viewpoint according to which the progress of arts, science and technology is disentangled from peoples' customs, morals, and manners (*Sitten und Gebräuche*) -that is, their virtuousness, vices, and moral standards in general. In 1789, in a tone rather critical of the idea of “savage nobility”, he writes:

To wax indignant about the shortcomings of civil (*bürgerliche*) society, and to prefer condition of savagery (*Wildheit*) is to forget that the refined person, as much as the savage, lives in enjoyment of his own existence, and that the difference between these consists only in type of enjoyment. The enjoyment of the refined person resides in accomplishments for which the capacity lies dormant in the savage (Forster quoted in Sikka 2011, 47).

Likewise, as the above paragraph indicates, as does the account of the Tannese people, Forster maintains the authoritative outlook inspired by the Enlightenment doctrine of progress and “civilization” as its final result. However, in *A Voyage Round the World*, Forster formulates his double critique, that is, “a critique of imperfect Europe, which has not yet reached the stage of Enlightenment; and a critique of the South Seas, which lacks refinements in culture and commerce” (Zhang 2013, 274). The following passage from *A Voyage Round the World* is illustrative of this position:

It is unhappy enough that the unavoidable consequence of all our voyages of discovery, has always been the loss of a number of innocent lives; but this heavy injury done to the little uncivilized communities which Europeans have visited, is trifling when compared to the irretrievable harm entailed upon them by corrupting their morals. If these evils were in some measure compensated by the introduction of some real benefit in these countries, or by the abolition of some other immoral customs among their inhabitants, we might at least comfort ourselves, that what they lost on one hand, they gained on the other; but I fear that hitherto our intercourse has been wholly disadvantageous to the nations of the South Seas; and that those communities have been the least injured, who have always kept aloof from us, and whose jealous disposition did not suffer our sailors to become too familiar among them, as if they had perceived in their countenances that levity of disposition, and that spirit of debauchery, with which they are generally reproached. (Forster 2000 [1777], 121-2)

The two-way criticism that Forster develops in the travelogue elucidates his endeavour to maintain impartiality in his portrayal of the societies he encountered, as a prerequisite for his unbiased philosophical travel account. Outlining his non-partisan ethnographic project, he writes:

Accustomed to look on all the various tribes of men, as entitled to an equal share of my good will, and conscious, at the same time, of the rights which I possess in common with every individual among them, I have endeavored to make my remarks with a retrospect to our general improvement and welfare; and neither attachment nor aversion to particular nations have influenced my praise or censure. (ibid, 2000 [1777], 9-10)

Yet, at the same time, Forster acknowledges limitations of the pursued ideal of objective representation. He consequently indicates the following (ibid, 9):

I have sometimes obeyed the powerful dictates of my heart, and given voice to my feelings; for, as I do not pretend to be free from the weaknesses common to my fellow creatures, it was necessary for every reader to know the colour of the glass through which I looked.

By recognizing and acknowledging both, internal and external factors -or in his own terms the human “weaknesses” and “colour of the glass” of the observer’s point of view -which substantially shape ethnographical and travel accounts, Forster achieved a major

breakthrough in the context of travel literature and ethnographical writings of the late eighteenth century. Adding that “(...) two travellers seldom saw the same object in the same manner, and each reported the fact differently, according to his sensations, and his peculiar mode of thinking”, so that “it is therefore necessary to be acquainted with the observer, before any use could be made for his observations” (ibid, 9), he pointed out the importance of subjectivity embedded in the experience of difference. In this way, Forster anticipated the discussion of authority and positionality of the author which shook anthropology in the last quarter of the twentieth century, during one of the most turbulent crises in the history of the discipline.

However, Forster’s work remains illustrative of the late eighteenth-century zeitgeist, notwithstanding his visionary prudence pertaining to techniques of ethnographical writing and knowledge production, as well as the sophisticated approach to human diversity. Albeit Forster recognized and stressed the variability of different cultural formations, his intellectual enterprise firmly rested upon foundations of Enlightenment thought, profoundly pervaded with progressivist doctrine; the notion of civilization, as a final result of progress, remains prominent in his writings, as the main criterion for general improvement of humankind’s condition. Retaining both universalistic and particularistic epistemological frameworks, Forster’s work reflects tensions and major developments in early German-speaking anthropology, an intellectual tradition which gave birth to a number of key concepts which profoundly influenced the development of the discipline worldwide.

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[1] Seventeen-year-old Georg Forster was appointed as a draughtsman and personal assistant to his father, the naturalist Johann Reinhold Forster who was hired for the expedition as its chronicler.

[2] Participation in Captain Cook's expedition, followed by the successful reception of *A Voyage Round the World* and its translation established Georg Forster as a renowned translator and traveller. As a "professional travel writer" (Uhlig 2004, 274-5), he played a significant part in the production and popularization of travel literature, not only by writing reviews, but also by editing or writing introductions for a considerable number of travel books published in his time (s. Tzoref-Askenazi 2010, 4).

[3] The journal was earlier known as *Beiträge zur Völker- und Länderkunde*, co-authored by Sprengel and Forster's father Johann Reinhold, and was the first journal to include the word *Völkerkunde* in its title (Vermeulen 2015, 390).

[4] *Śakuntalā* is one of the most famous pieces of Indian classical drama which presents the events surrounding the character of the same name found in the Indian epic *Mahābhārata*.

[5] *Völkerbeschreibung*, coined in 1740 by Gerhard Friedrich Müller (1705-1783), was a German-language concept that preceded the concept of ethnography, implying the emergence of a new method in the study of peoples and it was conceived as an empirical, critical, and comprehensive research programme (Vermeulen 2015). As a more inclusive way of the study of societies, *Völkerbeschreibung* shifted its focus from mere descriptions of peoples' "manners and customs", characteristic of travel literature in the late

eighteenth century (ibid, 209), which was imbued with fiction and misconceived generalizations. Although Georg Forster, at least to my knowledge, never explicitly referred to the term, he nevertheless was consistent with the ethnographic research programme outlined by Müller, by insisting on empirical and comprehensive research and adhering to these principles in his intellectual enterprise. As Han Vermeulen suggests (ibid, 334-5), it is most probable that Georg's father Johann Reinhold got introduced to Müller's research methodology during his and Georg's sojourn in Russia, even before Forster's journey with Captain Cook. Elucidating the ways in which other concepts, such as *Völkerkunde*, may have entered Forsters' vocabulary, Vermeulen (ibid, 390) states that is equally plausible that Johann Reinhold and Georg Forster adopted "the new vocabulary upon their return from the Pacific and tied their work to the terminology recently coined in Göttingen."

[6] Many travel accounts of the late eighteenth century were actually products of fiction written for entertainment purposes, in which authors "emphasized the elements of exotic and cultural differences" (Karyekar 2013, 2016).

[7] The islands were renamed the Cook Islands in 1824.

[8] Even though, in the year of its publication, and particularly Forster's accounts of the island Tahiti, the travelogue gave rise to "a group of German writers associated with the Pietist *Empfindsamkeit* (Sentimentality) movement (...) with a utopian plan for emigration" (Steinmetz 2004, 258) to the island.