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Eric J. Leed

Florida International University, hospitality@fiu.edu

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Prolegomenon to a History of Travel

Abstract

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Keywords

Eric J. Leed, Prolegomenon To a History of Travel, Travel migration, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Joan Didion, Travellers, FIU

Prolegomenon To a History of Travel

by
Eric J. Leed
Associate Professor
College of Arts and Sciences
Florida International University

The author attempts to provide a definition of travel by comparing it with the instinctive migration of animals and birds and viewing its changes over time. As a study of motion voluntarily undertaken, a history of travel can contribute to a better understanding of human beings.

A prolegomenon (a critical discussion of the issues intended to introduce a more extended work) is necessary before we can talk intelligently about the history of travel because, as yet, there is no "history" of travel. There are, of course many individual histories of travel in discrete historical periods, but none that takes in the entirety of the written record. One can find, for example, histories of geography, of discovery, of exploration, and of trade. There are also many studies of travellers of different sorts: itinerant scholars, tourists, diplomats, soldiers on expedition, nomads and gypsies, tramping workmen and entertainers, missionaries, sailors, and carterers and caravaneers. But as yet there is no history of the phenomenon which underlies all of these separate studies. There has been no study of the idea of travel itself, of significant human motion.

It is the absence of definitions and any firm theoretical guidelines that most daunts anyone who would attempt such a project. Without some sense of what travel is, we have no way of knowing what is relevant and what is irrelevant. The purpose of this prolegomenon is to supply some of these essential definitions and distinctions. We might begin with the essential question: What is travel?

Does travel include each and every kind of human journeying or only journeying of a specific type? Is travel even specifically human? Do not animals of other species travel? What impulses, needs, and urges are satisfied in this activity?

Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes after him, defined all life as motion and suggested that we might find the character of everything, animate and inanimate, in the forms and intensities of the "motion" unique to it. Of course, Aristotle tended to think of motion in its qualitative sense, as growth and generation, as the realization of those tendencies within an individual or species which suggest its direction, goal, and purpose. Hobbes thought much more in terms of physical, quantifiable motion — motion from place to place — and believed that things

and persons could be defined in terms of their inertias, their trajectories, and their powers of attraction and repulsion. Yet, in the history of travel we must try to put these two things together.

We know that individuals have been changed by their physical journeyings. We can likewise surmise that a species must be changed by transformations in its characteristic motion, in its form of "travel." Since the time of Piaget, we have become sensitive to the intimate relationship between the growth of a child's intelligence and the extension of its movements. With growing mobility, the child encounters events which "make a difference," which constitute information, and from which he or she can form a picture of the world which is essential if the child is to become "rational." Can we not argue the same way with respect to the human species and regard travel as a characteristically "human" form of motion which conditions and shapes the growth of the human intelligence in historical time? Can we define travel as that form of motion which defines the special, historical uniqueness of our species?

But how can we regard travel as a specifically human form of motion when everywhere we witness the regular, seasonal peregrinations of birds, fish, and insects? Do animals not travel? Most often, animal journeys are described as "migration" rather than travel. The distinction between animal migration and human travel is utterly conventional, but it is also instructive.

Technology Is Important to Travel

First, we have not yet witnessed other species of animals making use of tools or machines in their journeyings, while it is clear that the development and use of the technology of motion is one of the most significant factors in human history. We need not cite the myriad of mechanical means developed to consume space at a more rapid rate in order to stand in awe of the steady mechanization of our travel. It is also probable that birds would not take advantage of cheap air travel were it available.

However, the point here is not just that the history of travel must address this question of how mechanization changes our experience of travel; it must also investigate the extent to which this mechanization is itself the outcome of "long-term" human motives. Animals seem to prefer to use their own muscles to manipulate the natural forces of wind, water, and gravity in their movements. Human beings have, in an effort spanning centuries, built a technology which testifies to their preferences for passive over active motion, for being carried over carrying, for manipulating the natural forces of wind, water, gravity and combustion to the ends of human motion, and to using their own muscle power to consume space. Clearly these tendencies have culminated in a world of cars and freeways. But the point is that we must seek to understand the experience, motives, and feelings which have gone into the construction of this world.

Joan Didion's description of the freeway experience in Los Angeles gives us some insight into the emotional concomitants of mechanized "passive" motion.

To understand what was going on it is perhaps necessary to have participated in the freeway experience, which is the only secular communion Los Angeles has. Mere driving on the freeway is in no way the same as participating in it. Anyone can “drive” on the freeway, and many people with no vocation for it do, hesitating here and resisting there, losing the rhythm of the lane change, thinking about where they came from and where they are going. Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway. The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over. A distortion of time occurs . . .¹

Travel Changes Over Time

Secondly, and implicit in the first point, animal migration patterns show a remarkable persistence over time with respect to route, destination, and timing of departure and return. This is quite in contrast to the spectacle of human travel, which shows us great alterations in routes, centers, times of travel, motives, and purposes of journeying. Perhaps this is to say no more than that human travel has a history because it changes over time, and it is the job of the historian to discern the pattern and purpose revealed in these changes. True, naturalists have been banding birds and fish for only a few decades. But the changes which naturalists have recorded in animal migration patterns are much less impressive than the persistence of these patterns.

All catches of salmon made by trawlers in deep waters can be assigned to the sites of the estuaries and deltas of vanished rivers . . . The fish, swimming deeper and deeper follow the course of the main river as far as the place where the ancient water-course had its estuary on the edge of the continental plateau.²

The salmon, whose life is migration, never leaves his river unless forcibly removed. Bats, Canada geese, eels, monarch butterflies, and countless other species show a fidelity to route, season, and destination that astonishes us — but only because human journeying has shown the opposite characteristics.

We like to contrast human travel to animal migration by saying that the first is “free,” often voluntary, governed by the will and the purposes of the traveller, while the journeying of animals is “instinctive,” governed by necessities, changes in temperature, food supply, population pressures, or endocrinal balance. Animal migration is a kind of tropism, a tendency inherent in the organism to move toward conditions optimum for its health and reproduction. We find such tropisms constantly in nature.

Waters with a temperature of fourteen degrees centigrade or over constitute the albacore’s habitat throughout its life. It follows these waters on the surface during its dispersal migrations and it accompanies them to the depths at the time of its breeding migration.³

The problem in contrasting the instinctive migration of animals with the free travel of human beings is that we find such tropisms constantly in human society. One would hesitate to consider the yearly migration of comfortable, older Americans to Florida for the winter season anything but such a tropism. The migrations of herring are governed by changes in the salinity of the water, those of crickets and locusts by food supply and population pressures. But are these so different from the movements of pastoral nomads which are governed by the ripening of the grasses that feed their flocks? A Bedouin writer, Isac Diqs, explains the eastward tropism of his family in different terms. "I do not know why we used to go towards the east in the morning. It may be because we liked to feel the warmth of the sun on our faces."⁴

Animal migration is a survival strategy, a means for more efficient adult feeding and growth, for surviving the winter, and for more successful reproduction of the species; but this is true of human migration too — not those one-way journeys which historians and sociologists call migration, but the true round-trip migration of pastoral or hunting and gathering peoples. R. E. Marrou, perhaps the most respected authority on animal migration, was impressed by how recently this particular strategy had appeared.

We cannot escape the fact that between fifteen thousand and fifty thousand years ago, and again in the last five thousand years . . . the migration of most species and its incredibly various patterns must have evolved . . . All such adaptations must be the product of evolution in something like the last ten thousand years, a conclusion shattering to most current evolutionary theory.⁵

It is probable that our earliest human ancestors were nomadic hunters migrating to the same rhythms of nature which dictated the patterns followed by ruminants, and these patterns persist even today in nomadic societies.

Not All Journeying Is Travel

But the recognition of "tropisms" of necessitated, instinctive journeying in the human species must lead us to the conclusion that not all human journeying is "travel." Only in the roughest sense would I consider my daily trips to the store or to work as travel. In my quotidian peregrinations I am establishing the boundaries of the familiar, the dimensions of the "home," a world bound by the necessities of furnishing my physical existence. In my travels, however, I cross over the boundaries etched by daily journeys into a world which is less familiar, more uncertain, and which takes much of its meaning from the contrast it poses to routine, obligation, and necessity.

It is in this setting that we must examine the age-old convention which equates travel and human freedom. This convention requires that we regard travel as the exemplification of the human being's free nature. In the Middle Ages we find that an English lord who wished to free his serf had to declare his intention in a church, market, or country court. He bestowed a lance and a sword upon his former

bondsman and took the newly-freed man to a crossroads to show him that “all ways lie open to his feet.”⁶ Travel was posed against the necessities and comforts of the home and defined as *travail* which refines the personality of the traveller to its essence. The English romantic poet Wordsworth, himself an indefatigable traveller, found the liberating character of travel precisely in the profusion of choices and paths that confront the wanderer. It is this which purifies as it disorients.

Whither shall I turn
By road or pathway, or through trackless field,
Up hill or down, or shall some floating thing
Upon the river point me out my course?⁷

Here Wordsworth celebrates something characteristically human, which we may not be able to define precisely, but which we know is antithetical to those ancient riverbeds and estuaries which laid down the track for generation after generation of salmon, or to those air, land, and sea trails which fowl, ruminant, and fish have followed for millenia by instinct. We can use this word “instinct” if we understand the term as Charles Darwin defined it:

An action, which we ourselves require experience to perform, when performed by an animal, more especially by a very young one, without experience, and when performed by many individuals in the same way, without knowing for what purpose it is performed, is usually said to be instinctive.⁸

Travel Involves Experience

In contrast, an action which we require experience to perform, which is performed by many individuals but rarely at the same time or in the same way, when motivated by a clear and conscious “purpose,” cannot be considered instinctive. This perfectly describes travel. Travel is the perfect paradigm of experience, of those events which “make a difference.” It is undertaken with the aid of the accumulated experience codified in maps and guide books. Through this action individuals perceive the differences which constitute the human and natural world, correcting their maps, guide books, and preconceptions as a result of this encounter. Travel is always undertaken by people who carry with them an informational structure which can be amended as a result of their experience.

It strikes us as a little absurd to believe, as La Fontaine did, that as a result of his travels the sparrow “learned a great deal,”⁹ for travel makes no difference in the sparrow’s identity, character, or behavior. The sparrow may experience the same alterations of climate, altitude, and temperature as the human traveller, and yet these differences (we presume) do not produce changes, information, or renewed purpose because (we again presume) the sparrow lacks the means of recording these differences, of registering them and comparing them with other records. What is generally true of how human beings acquire information is specifically true of travel. As Gregory Bateson observes:

The same general truth — that all knowledge of external

events is derived from the relationship between them — is recognizable in the fact that to achieve more accurate perception, a human being will always resort to a change in the relationship between himself and the object . . . In this sense, our initial sensory data are always “first derivations,” statements about *differences* which exist among external objects or statements about *changes* which occur either in them or in our relationship to them . . . What we perceive easily is difference and change — and difference is a relationship.¹⁰

Differences which are too slight or too slowly presented are not perceived unless there is some means of recording and registering them. When a traveller drives from New York to Miami, he experiences, slowly and by infinite degrees, topographical, climatic, and cultural differences. Without boundaries or lines of demarcation he could not compose these myriad differences into images of place: “north” and “south,” temperate and tropical zones. With these in mind, he is able to appreciate unexpected departures from, or confirmations of, those preconceived experiences. Of course, such things as the Mason-Dixon Line or the Tropic of Cancer are fictions, artificial lines which allow us to consider experienced differences as resulting from different “places,” *topoi*, or locales. But without such things it is difficult to imagine how we could have such things as “experience” or travel. Travel might thus be regarded as a form of human motion which is significant in so far as individuals, through it, experience relevant differences in the human and natural world.

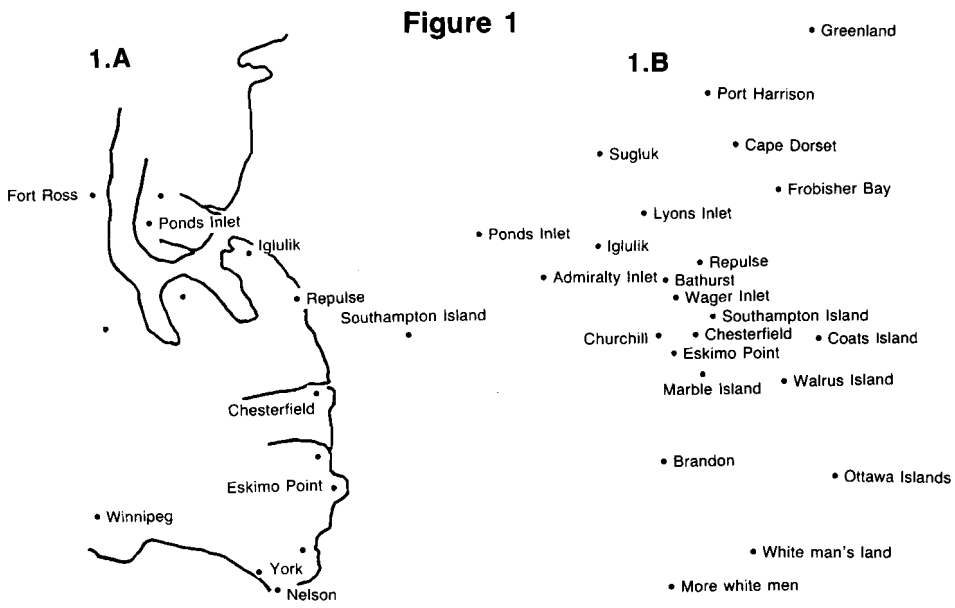
People Travel With Different Maps

But not all differences to be found in the world are relevant to every traveller. The merchant might seek to realize through his travels the difference between what people of different locales might pay for the same object. The military entrepreneur is one who attempts to profit from differences between his own and “local” military strength. The pilgrim seeks to mobilize to the end of his own salvation the implicit difference between the site of his normal, profane existence and the sacrality of the center he visits. The person travelling for his health generally expects to benefit from experienced differences in temperature, atmosphere, elevation, or climatic zone. Each of these individuals travels with a different map, each of which details the differences which are significant for his own purposes and needs, each of which categorizes the world in different terms.

Maps are of crucial importance to the historian of travel for they provide the most obvious clues as to how individuals transform “space” into meaningful and significant “place.” It would appear, for example, that men and women experience space differently and draw different kinds of maps. Phillip T. Pearce’s research on the ways in which tourists become familiar with the cities they visit suggests that when men and women first come to a city they orient themselves around the dominant monuments, the “sights.”¹¹ But from this point on, the maps they drew diverge. As they grow familiar with a new city, men

fill in the districts along the main thoroughfares; they are “path-oriented.” Women, on the other hand, are “monument and district” oriented. They fill in the districts around the primary monuments.

Another example of sexual differences in spatial orientation bears out this distinction. Robert Flaherty asked members of the Aivilik Eskimo tribe located at Southampton Island to draw maps of their territory. The map made by a Eskimo Woman, Karleaner (1.B) is a kind of star-map of dots, each of which represents a trading post or settlement, many of which she knew from hearsay. Her estimates of direction and distance are increasingly vague as one travels away from the home island.



The map of the man, Agoolak (1.A) is dominated by the coastline, the path of his travels. His map includes fewer places than that of the woman, but they are related by the path of his travels. The distinction between path-orientation and place-orientation, a distinction implicit in Joan Didion’s description of the freeway experience, is not just a distinction between male and female experience of space. Travellers ordinarily are dominated by a consciousness of the path, while geographers ordinarily focus upon place.

We might conclude this contrast between migration and travel (the latter definitive in some specific ways of the human species) with the observation that humans seem to be unique in their demand that their journeyings be significant. It is difficult to imagine a Canada goose driving south, expecting to learn from his experience, garnering souvenirs, checking his maps, or dreaming of paradise, of the world-center, of the land of the dead. This is only to say that it is only through the apparatus of boundaries, images of places, centers, locales, or essential fictions, that space becomes meaningful to acculturated individuals, that it becomes able to be experienced. We must study

these maps and categories in order to understand how specific individuals from specific cultures at particular times establish meaning in space as place. Only then can we understand how meaning can be experienced in actual physical journeyings, as in travel.

Most of the records from which we must reconstruct a consecutive, critical narrative, or a story of travel, consist of descriptions of places visited by the travellers. These places often perform the function of categories within which is filed everything known about a people, culture, or area. In short, travel books often consist of a categorical, if spatial, ordering of the world, which perform the function of encyclopaediae. But we know that this is not travel, for the traveller orders his experience progressively rather than categorically. The traveller penetrates across the lines inscribed upon the world by the geographer. Perhaps the best way to define the difference between the geographer and the traveller (both of whom one might find in the same person) is that the former experiences a world at rest, while the latter experiences a world in motion.

It is difficult to penetrate fully the significance of this distinction. The study of travel is, first of all, a study of motion, of friction, of the action of wind, water, and earth upon the human organism. Moreover, it is the study of motion voluntarily undertaken which acquires significance insofar as those boundaries which differentiate the known from the unknown are crossed. But the significance of something is often quite different from the needs, functions, and purposes which it fulfills. The long and well-recorded history of travel testifies to the fact that human beings have always appeared to have a need for motion and that this need appears to be stronger in some individuals than others and more important in some cultures than others. To propose that people undertake travel because of the pleasure they might find in motion is to contradict the record, which most often supports Charles Doughty's observation that "the ride on a camel is never not uneasy."

Early Travel Was Not Pleasurable

But then it is difficult to find expressions of pleasure in travel before the 19th century. Travel was supposed to be travail and ordeal. It was also one of the most incontrovertible conventions of travel literature, particularly hegemonic in the 17th and 18th centuries, that the traveller must not talk about himself or his feelings. He must describe the world that he encounters. The ban on subjectivity, which seems to be one of the dominant effects of this convention, is reinforced by the tendency to begin travel books with the first day of the journey — dispensing with any autobiographical background on the traveller. When one does find expressions of pleasure in the motion of travel, they are not unlike the "rapture of the freeway" described by Joan Didion. Francis Fletcher, chaplain of Sir Francis Drake's "Pelican" on its voyage around the world in 1577, provides us with one such example.

Now we are coasting along to the Southward for Cape Blanco. Had every sail at command in the way, as if Neptune

had been present, without any resistance, or refusal or resisting.¹²

Here Fletcher voices delight in the feeling of unresisted and uncontested motion. He is in that "flow state" described by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi as a state precipitated by surrender to a situation which has its own logic, its own necessity, and which requires little or no conscious direction by the participant. Such flow states have been reported to be the primary payoff and the preferred state for basketball players, for mountain climbers, for swimmers and runners, for dancers and, one might also add, for professional travellers. Such days of fair sailing, perhaps, constitute the reason why many take up careers upon the most unstable of elements and work the land and searoads. As John Ovington, chaplain aboard the East Indian "Benjamin" on its voyage to Surate in 1689, observed, such days of unresisted motion are the thing that makes long voyages tolerable: "Tis this kind of indulgent weather that mainly animates men to the undertaking of this tedious voyage. For otherwise the length of it would be insupportable."¹³

It is unfortunate that there is no psychology of travel and that the effect of motion upon the human psyche has been studied by psychologists almost entirely from a pathological point of view. The only book which calls itself a psychology of travel is a study of motion sickness, the disorientation and fatigue caused by motion.¹⁴ It is never even thought worthy of mention that, while some are nauseated by the environment of motion, others adapt to it readily and still others find in this environment something that obviously satisfied a deep, organic unconscious need.

A history of travel can contribute to our understanding of the psychological makeup of human beings insofar as we are attentive to the rhythms of motion and rest which supply the warp and woof of travel books. We can hear these rhythms operating in even the most laconic log or journal, as in the log of William Dampier, a famous 18th century circumnavigator, privateer, and geographer, an entry which describes a night and a day of cruising in the Gulf of Panama:

About 10 o'clock at night we got in about seven leagues to the windward of Cape Passado under the Line, and then it proved calm; and we lay and drove all night, being fatigued from the previous day. The 18th day we had little wind till the afternoon, and then we made sail standing along the shore to the Northward, having the wind as SSW and fair weather.¹⁵

There is little of significance in this passage, for Dampier and his men are simply cruising, going nowhere, looking for targets of opportunity. But perhaps this complete lack of dramatic incident, the intermittancies of calm, the laying hove to, and then the fair sailing before a following wind suggest the reasons why a few individuals have made a life of voyaging. The experience of being constantly rocked and moved, the repetitious, hypnotic, flowing movements of a ship at sea, might be as addictive as the "rapture of the freeway" described by Didion. This passage allows us to appreciate the contrast between "motion"

and directional travel, and to appreciate the different urges — for motion and for significance — which travel might, in complex combinations, satisfy.

Perhaps we can now return to our original question with an answer. Travel can be no better defined than as significant human motion undertaken to realize the differences which adhere in the human and natural environment. It is “significant” insofar as this motion is conducted and organized by “fictions,” lines, boundaries, paths and centers. It is “human” because in it we find phenomena which contrast with the motion of other species. Human travel is often voluntary and exploratory; it is often a conscious advancement into the unknown and the uncertain. It thus constitutes a primary area in which the human spirit is elaborated and specified as something “free.” It is obviously “motion” and, as such, it satisfies urges and needs which alone can explain why human beings have travelled for as long as there has been a human species.

Footnotes

- ¹Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), p. 83.
- ²Rene Thevenin, *Animal Migration*, (New York: Walker and Co., 1941), p. 43.
- ³*Ibid.*
- ⁴Isaak Diqs, *A Bedouin Boyhood* (New York: Praeger, 1967), p. 14.
- ⁵Sidney A. Gauthereaux, ed., *Animal Migration, Orientation and Navigation* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), p. 54.
- ⁶*Leges Henrici*, 78, i.
- ⁷Georg Roppen and Richard Sommer, *Strangers and Pilgrims: An Essay on the Metaphor of Journey*, Norwegian Studies in English, No. 11 (Oslo: Akademisk Forlag, 1964), p. 145.
- ⁸Thevenin, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, viii.
- ¹⁰Gregory Bateson and Jurgen Ruesch, *Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*. (New York: Norton and Co., 1951), p. 173.
- ¹¹Phillip L. Pearce, “Mental Souvenirs: A Study of Tourists and Their City Maps,” *Australian Journal of Psychology*, (1977), pp. 203-210.
- ¹²Sir Francis Drake, *The World Encompassed* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1854), p. 13.
- ¹³John Ovington, *A Voyage to Surat*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), p. 31.
- ¹⁴James Reason, *Man in Motion: The Psychology of Travel* (New York: Walker and Co., 1979).
- ¹⁵William Dampier, *Voyages*, I (London: E. Grant Richards, 1906), p. 34.