

WAVES ACROSS THE SOUTH: A NEW HISTORY OF REVOLUTION AND EMPIRE
SUJIT SIVASUNDARAM

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How might the French Revolution, or British imperial discourse, have been shaped by the cultures and peoples of colonised islands in the global South? In *Waves Across the South* (2020), Professor of History Sujit Sivasundaram departs from traditional Euro-centric analyses of 18th and 19th century imperial history that focus on revolutionary processes as enacted by European powers. Rather, in the waters around places like New Zealand, Mauritius, and the Persian Gulf, Sivasundaram shows us how Pacific and Indian Ocean archipelagos actively shaped new institutions and ideologies, as opposed to being mere receivers of those. The book is set in the “age of revolutions”: the decades of the late 18th and early 19th centuries which saw the American and French revolutions, as well as struggles for independence in the Caribbean and Latin America, usually portrayed as an ‘Atlantic triangle of grand events’ (p. 1). The author’s timeline, however, begins with the 1722 collapse of the Safavid Empire in modern day Iran (p. xv). The attention to political events of the coastal South and their effect on European politics and history becomes the hallmark of the author’s approach.

In his description of archipelagic thought, Smith argues for a literature on island places that pays attention to the physicality of coast and sea, as well as to the ‘polycentrism’ seen in ‘the multiplication and distribution of sites of agency across a network rather than their clustering around a central power’ (2013: 6). Sivasundaram’s juxtaposition of indigenous agency with colonial power is in keeping with this tradition. The book’s central thesis is that as colonisers came ashore across the global South, they were met with a surge of Indigenous and non-European politics that transformed the various systems and styles of European imperialism. This argument is advanced over seven substantive chapters that take different bodies of water and their cultures as a focus. For example, in chapter 2 we learn of the effect that colonisation had on political systems in Tonga and New Zealand, among others. History and anthropology have often recorded that this tended to result in the centralisation of systems of chieftaincy and governance, as Europeans established institutions that better reflected their notions of civility and with which they found easier to engage. However, Sivasundaram argues that this neglects

the agency of local people in transforming their politics. Often, power became centralised through an act of resistance, as the image of a sole Indigenous monarch could be used to rally the people of an entire island against a common invader. Other times, local big men and women were impressed by the power of European monarchs and simply sought something like it for themselves.

The relationship between indigenous agency and the ocean as a cultural space is a common theme throughout the book. The portrayal of European powers as maritime versus relatively land-based island cultures is one that the narrative categorically rejects. We are shown how, by inhabiting the ocean and its movements, peoples of the global South created maritime societies that vied for space with Europeans in a globalising world. The author builds this thesis across varied examples including how Indian seafarers first gained advantage in Indian Ocean trade through their understanding of the monsoon winds, and how instances of mutiny against European captains led to the establishment of settlements on far flung Pacific islands.

The writing style, though factual, is also colourful – that is to say, *blue*. One of the books most immersive and enjoyable aspects is its consistent location upon the waves. The challenge to imperial expansion posed by rain, storms, swells and other physical processes are often included in the analysis. Watery metaphors continue throughout and reproduce the core themes of archipelagic thought, which also emphasise how exchanges between peoples, places, and powers of vastly different scales characterise an emergent world connected – not separated – by oceans.

Sivasundaram collected data from a wide range of primary sources across the South. He uses the letters of Burmese monks to examine changes to everyday life as they were experienced and spoken about by people across the region; Māori maps; paintings of Indian boat crew; and various artefacts of material culture that are analysed to demonstrate how the common theme of intercultural exchange between Europeans and non-Europeans manifests at different times and locations. On several occasions, the author mentions his visits to some of the locations in question. Given his own insistence on the importance of place and location on the sea, it is a shame that the narrative does not pause here to offer vivid descriptions of contemporary port cities or cosmopolitan archipelagos of the South. Although a historical piece, such descriptions would have allowed for a comparison with the historical record and the discussion of how historical indigenous politics affect today's institutions – not to mention to bring the locations to life in another way.

The publication of *Waves Across the South* is timely, both in terms of a growing academic interest in the ocean as cultural space, but also in the context of a renewed political interest as part of the UN Decade of Ocean Science (2021-2030) and the EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030. The book ought to form part of the theoretical and factual arsenal through which coastal communities are engaged in these grand plans as they attempt to integrate local understandings and deliberative governing structures into the collection and application of science to improve the health of the oceans.

In all, this is a seminal text that demonstrates the necessity of re-imagining coastlines as cultural connectors – not peripheral to urban centres and historical processes. Examining how these islands and European political centres are entangled will help readers understand the 21st-century reality of Britain and Ireland as they navigate new relationships amongst their constituent parts and with continental Europe. *Waves Across the South* will be of interest to a wide readership across anthropology, especially scholars of coastal and island communities, island studies, (post-)colonialism, and imperial history.

References

Smith, J., 2013. "An Archipelagic Literature: Re-framing 'The New Nature Writing'", *Green Letters: Studies in Ecotourism*, 17(1), 5-15.