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Georg Forster and the Politics of Natural History: A Case Study for Students of Kant

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Anglophone attention to issues of race and racism, with particular attention to Kant and other members of the German Enlightenment, has long been hampered by a lack of critical editions in English. While this is no longer significantly true for Kant studies, it continues to be the case for many of the most relevant works by Georg Forster and Christoph Meiners. This is a problem for philosophers working exclusively in English, and it is one that is only exacerbated by the field’s general lack of interest in not just the intellectual history of philosophy and its figures, but in analyses published in languages other than English today. Ahistorical, monolingual approaches become especially problematic, however, when it comes to the philosophical analysis of race and racism, given the need to approach such topics from multiple angles at once—historical, political, cultural, economic, and legal—a fact that is no less true for scholarship on the figures of the eighteenth century than it is for the study of the present one.¹

My aim in what follows therefore is to fill in a bit of the bigger picture, the specific context within which a writer like Georg Forster and his cohort were working, in order to better frame the kinds of specialized discussions of Kant’s philosophy of race that we find today. These discussions can be roughly divided between those investigations focused on issues related to racial taxonomy, and thus situated most clearly within the history of science, and those attentive to the connection between Kant’s natural historical writings and his larger systematic concerns regarding the use of teleology when approaching both nature and history.² The research done in each of these versions can certainly be valuable, but it remains for the most part disconnected from any discussion of the socio-historical context within which discussions of racial diversity arose in the first place. It is at this point clear to many scholars that eighteenth-century discourse on political rights and personal freedom was framed by an increasing awareness on the part of its central interlocutors of the slave trade, and of the African and Amerindian dispossession this trade entailed. But we should also recognize that the fascination with natural history at the time and the creation of scholarship devoted to investigating “the varieties of mankind” were located within the same socio-political framework.³ Contrary to a long-standing caricature, Kant was wholly abreast of the world events of his day, and he had ready access to the information coming out of Forster’s Göttingen-connected network via the many journals and books produced by the university.⁴

¹ The point has been made by Robert Bernasconi, *Critical Philosophy of Race and Philosophical Historiography*, in: Paul Taylor, et. al. (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Race*, London 2017, pp. 3–13.

² I have produced work of both kinds myself, e.g., *Species, Variety, Race: Vocabularies of Difference from Buffon to Kant*, in: *Dianoia-Rivista di Filosofia*, vol. 39 (2024), pp. 131–155; *From Crooked Wood to Moral Agent: Connecting Anthropology and Ethics in Kant*, in: *Estudos Kantianos* vol. 2.1 (2014), pp. 185–204.

³ See for example Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress*, New York, 2013, Andrew Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment*, Baltimore, 2013, and Julia Jorati, *Slavery and Race: Philosophical Debates in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford 2024.

⁴ Although Kant considered the *Göttingschen Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* – the venue where the bulk of Georg Forster’s reviews appeared – to be essentially hostile to his own work, he followed it closely. For some

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Let us take a closer look then at the wealth of information that Kant would have had before him as he gathered his thoughts about the nature and specific vocation of mankind.

Now as we get started on this investigation, a key historical fact must be borne in mind throughout what follows: Göttingen University was an institution set up by the British to embellish King George I’s German ‘possession,’ i.e., the Hannover Protectorate that was governed by a ‘Personal Union’ with England between 1737 and 1837. From the German-born monarch’s perspective, Hannover was not just another British outpost, but the one closest to home and heart, and he thus spared no expense when furnishing first Münchhausen and then Heyne (Georg Forster’s father-in-law) the funds for building a university with a library and a research faculty that would quickly rival the leading universities in Leyden and Paris on the European continent. This explains not just the enormous number of English-language volumes collected by Heyne for the university library, or the transfer of a large portion of the artifacts collected on Cook’s voyages from Banks to Blumenbach in order to establish an ethnological museum, but why more than fifty percent of the students at the university were international, and indeed why King George III sent three of his own sons to study there.⁵

In the 1770s German readers thus received regular reporting via Göttingen on the events unfolding in Britain’s American colonies. There might have been pervasive grumbling over the German conscripts being ‘sold’ to enrich certain noblemen in Kassel, but the main buildings in Göttingen were nonetheless lit up in celebration on news of Britain’s victories in its campaign against the American rebels.⁶ Benjamin Franklin’s immense popularity in Germany—Herder was an tremendous fan—did much to shift public opinion in favor of the colonists once the Treaty in Paris was concluded in 1783. After which Germans proceeded to read with curiosity and interest about the constitutional debates taking place in Philadelphia, even as they were learning of Britain’s plans to establish a new ‘thief colony’ at Sydney Cove.

The idea for a new British settlement had been put forward as early as 1784 in light of the dire conditions being experienced by England’s prisoner population. With no largescale prisons, convicts who were not to be hanged were primarily housed in floating barges along

evidence of this see my essay: Kant and the Problem of Idealism: On the Significance of the Göttingen Review,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 44.2 (Summer 2006), pp. 297–317. But we can also hear directly from Kant, who asked his publisher Friedrich Nicolovius to tell Forster: “Ich bitte Ihn meiner Seits meiner größten Hochachtung und zugleich der Dankbarkeit, für die mannigfaltige aus seinen interessanten Schriften gezogene Ergötzung und Belehrung, zu versichern” (18 November 1790), in: *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin 1902–, vol. 11, p. 235.

⁵ For Göttingen’s scholarly impact see Thomas Biskup, *The university of Göttingen and the Personal Union, 1737–1837*, in: Brandan Simms and Torsten Riotte (eds.), *The Hanoverian Dimension in British History, 1714–1837*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 128–160, and Charles McClelland, *State, Society, and University in Germany: 1700–1914*, Cambridge 1980, pp. 34–149. Kant’s estate catalogue includes multiple copies of Wieland’s Weimar journal, *Der Teutsche Merkur* (1773–1790), but both Wieland (‘Wylandt’) and the *Merkur* are mentioned repeatedly across Kant’s letter exchanges, starting in 1774 with reference to Wieland and Goethe’s relation to the new Philanthropinum school in Dessau. In 1786 the *Merkur* published the first of Reinhold’s important “Letters on Kantian Philosophy,” but we might note rather that issue’s inclusion of an article with a description of the famed Göttingen library and its liberal lending practices: *Auszug eines Briefes über Göttingen*, in: *Der Teutsche Merkur von 1786, Erstes Vierteljahr*, Weimar, pp. 90–96.

⁶ Two excellent resources here are Horst Dippel, *Germany and the American Revolution: 1770–1800*, Chapel Hill 1977, and Eugene Doll, *American History as Interpreted by German Historians from 1770–1815*, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia 1949. Doll’s piece discusses Forster at numerous points (Forster, like Herder and many others, was a member of the American Philosophical Society), but the text is best read with a copy of Baginsky’s helpfully annotated bibliography nearby: Paul Ben Baginsky’s *Bibliography of German Works Relating to America, 1493–1800*, Berwyn Heights, 2019 [1938]. For a sense of contemporary responses to conscription see: Henry Stafford King, *Echoes of the American Revolution in German Literature*, Berkeley 1929, and Albert Schmitt, *Herder und Amerika*, The Hague 1967.

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the Thames, and diseases like cholera were rampant. Up until the outbreak of the war for independence, some 120,000 convicts had been shipped to Britain’s American colonies, with a fed-up Benjamin Franklin having reportedly announced at one point that he would like to send back a rattlesnake for every criminal dumped on American shores. The final push for the British decision, however, was the announcement by Russia’s leader, the German-born Empress Catherine the Great, that all sales of flax to England would henceforth be subject to a significant tax hike. Flax was a critical import for Britain since it furnished materials for cordage and sails, both items in heavy demand for an empire built and maintained on the back of its ships.⁷

The travel narratives produced in the wake of Captain Cook’s three expeditions to the Pacific had in fact carefully recorded the types of resources that might be suitable for colonial acquisition. This was as true for Georg Forster’s famous account of the second voyage, as it was for the narrative of Cook’s first visit to New Holland (Australia) in 1770. Compiled by John Hawkesworth, the naval report on Cook’s first expedition included illustrations, maps, and detailed accounts of sites wherein ships might harbor for repairs. The volumes dedicated to the first voyage were published in 1773 and widely available in German translation the following year, with Kant, for example, making immediate use of them in his course on Physical Geography. It was the narrative’s attention to an abundance of flax in the region, however, that seems to have tipped the balance in favor of the thief colony’s location. Although Forster had not been to New Holland himself, Cook had made a stop at Norfolk Island, which lay some fourteen-hundred kilometers east of the mainland, with Forster aboard, and both men subsequently noted the potential advantages of the island as a stopover for ships needing to replace sails and masts—Norfolk pines are notably straight and tall—on their way from England to India. In November of 1786 Forster published a new essay on the advantages of Cook’s initial landing site on the coast of New Holland, Botany Bay, as a site for a larger settlement and just two weeks later the British parliament formally passed its resolution to establish a penal colony there.⁸

The news on this was greeted with a level of enthusiasm that might seem surprising from our own historical vantage point. But it perfectly captures the widespread cultural belief at the time in the salutary effect of industry and labor. To understand this particular part of the story then is to focus on our main characters’ faith in humanity’s capacity for moral regeneration under the proper circumstances. Evidence of this for many was taken on the one hand, from Rome’s spectacular rise from inauspicious beginnings and, on the other, the success of the American “convicts” in having created a self-governing republic in their own right. As one observer put it in *The Public Advertiser* in October 1786: “It is an excellent thought on the part of the administration to people this new colony in the very same way their forefathers did America. [...] But why mention the grandeur of America from an offspring of convicts, when we have all heard of Rome? Who peopled imperial Rome? Thieves, villains,

⁷ Britain’s thirst for this material added obvious motivation to Prussia’s desire to takeover Silesia’s large production of spruce linen. On the Silesian linen trade see: Anka Steffen and Klaus Webber, *Spinning and Weaving for the Slave Trade: Proto-Industry in Eighteenth-Century Silesia*, in: Felix Brahm and Eve Rosenhaft (eds.), *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850*, Cambridge 2021, pp. 87–108, and Anka Steffen, *Silesia, Serfdom, and Slavery*, in: *Journal of Global Slavery*, vol. 8 (2023), pp. 237–268.

⁸ Forster’s essay was initially planned to accompany his translation of Cook’s third voyage, but as events quickly unfolded – Arthur Phillip had already been named the prospective Governor of the new colony ahead of parliamentary debate – Forster published his account separately. See: *Neuholland und die britische Colonie in Botany-Bay*, in: *Georg Forsters Werke. Sämtliche Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe*, Berlin 1958, volume 5, pp. 160–180. Subsequent references to Forster’s *Werke* will be cited in-text as GFW followed by volume and page number, e.g., GFW 5: 160. The history here is told especially well by Robert J. King, *Norfolk Island: Phantasy and Reality, 1770–1814*, in: *The Great Circle, A Publication of the Australian Association for Maritime History*, vol. 25.2 (2003), pp. 20–41.

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robbers, and murderers.”⁹ The author of this missive signed off as “Numa,” the legendary King of Rome, said to have been born on the day of Rome’s founding, and successor to Romulus.

References to Rome, and indeed whole works devoted to the Roman empire, were certainly common in this period. The first volume of Gibbon’s now-famous account of Rome’s decline and fall (1776; vol. 2, 1781, vol. 3, 1788) appeared in German translation in 1779, with a complete set available in German by 1790. German scholars were of course active in this area as well. Kant owned a copy of Meiners’s initial two-volume history of Rome which appeared in 1781 and 1782, but Meiners later came back to the topic in 1791 with a volume meant to serve as a companion to the complete set in German that had appeared the year before.¹⁰ Herder’s *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–1791)—the first two volumes of which were reviewed by Kant in a manner that effectively ended the friendship between him and his former student—also included long discussions of the history and lessons to be gleaned from the Romans. It should perhaps come as no surprise therefore to see references to the example provided by Rome appearing in German language news of British plans for the new colony. As one put it in the *Wiener Zeitung* of January 1787: the plan for the convicts “on the one hand exonerates the country of the outcasts of society, and perhaps at the same time works on the other hand through the betterment of these people to make them useful to humanity and the kingdom.” Indeed, one could hope that “eventually they may also erect a flourishing state, as did a band of not much better men a Rome and Roman Empire.”¹¹

One particular class of English sentiment here was prepared to make the connection to Rome by the appearance of William Hamilton’s highly popular account of Etruscan art (1766). Hamilton had served as the British Ambassador to Naples, but his clear passion was Roman art and history. The potter Josiah Wedgwood was so taken by Hamilton’s account that he named his new factory “Etruria” with the aim of creating jasper porcelain in emulation of Etruscan ceramics, and in 1769 the first products bore the stamp “Artes Etruriae Rerascuntur” [The Arts of Etruria Reborn].¹² Wedgwood’s great friend, the polymathic poet Erasmus Darwin, was similarly attracted to both the legends surrounding Rome and the model it provided for the planned colony. Thus when Joseph Banks sent batches of clay he had received from the newly established settlement to Wedgwood for testing (he also sent a batch to his friend Blumenbach in Göttingen), the two friends worked together, the one producing a series of clay medallions, and the other writing a commemorative poem to match, in honor of the new colony.

Wedgwood’s “Sydney Cove” medallions demonstrated the utility of the clay samples for manufacturing earthenware goods, and therefore worked, as he saw it, as a model pathway for the convicts to emulate in their pursuit of moral uplift through labor. The medallion itself depicted four maidens in classical attire, with a ship in the distance, and “Etruria 1789” printed below the scene. The formal title read: “Hope encouraging Art and Labour, under the influence of Peace, to pursue the employment necessary to give security and happiness to an infant settlement,” with Darwin’s poem echoing this in its title: “Visit of Hope to Sydney Cove.” This was in fact not the first effort on the part of the two friends to work together for

⁹ Cited by Robert J. King, www.australiaonthemap.org/index.html%3Fp=400.html, note 5.

¹⁰ For more on this see: Wilfried Nippel, *Gibbon and German Historiography*, in: Benedikt Stuchtey and Peter Wende (eds.), *British and German Historiography 1750–1950: Traditions, Perceptions and Transfers*, Oxford 2000, pp. 67–81.

¹¹ *Wiener Zeitung*, 20 January 1787, pp. 149–150; cited in: Robert J. King, unpublished ms. notes, with thanks to author for permission to cite from them.

¹² Much of this is recounted in Robert J. King’s history of a seal for the new colony: Etruria, the Great Seal of New South Wales, in: *Journal of the Numismatic Association of Australia*, vol. 5 (October 1990), pp. 3–8.

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what they saw as the betterment of society. Two years earlier, Wedgewood had designed a small cameo to be carried as identification for those committed to the abolition of the slave trade. The potter had produced and shipped dozens of the medallions at his own expense to abolitionist societies, including to Benjamin Franklin, who served as the President of the Philadelphia Society for the Abolition of Slavery. In this case, Darwin had again written a set of verses to match, with these eventually appearing as part of his long-form poem on the *Economy of Vegetation* (1791). Here Darwin explicitly drew a connection between Wedgewood’s pieces—in the 1806 edition of *The Poetical Works of Erasmus Darwin* he would have images of both medallions printed on the facing page—writing: “The bold cameo speaks, the soft intaglio thinks. / Whether, O Friend of Art! The gem you mould / Rich with new taste, with ancient virtue bold; / Form the poor fetter’d SLAVE on bended knee / From Britain’s sons imploring to be free; / Or with fair HOPE the brightening scenes improve, / And cheer the dreary wastes at Sydney Cove.”¹³ The connection between these companion medallions was clear so far as the two friends were concerned: moral reform could be achieved, whether through industry on the part of the convicts facing seven to fourteen years of hard labor in the new Welsh colony, or via abolition of the slave trade.

The portrayal of New Holland as the site of a new Etruria appeared repeatedly in these years. Forster’s father-in-law, C.G. Heyne, Professor of Eloquence and Poetry and, as noted already, head of the university library at Göttingen, gave an address on Roman deportation in relation to Botany Bay in 1791, and Forster’s wife, Therese Heyne Forster, was at work on a book (published in 1801 under her second husband’s name, Ludwig Ferdinand Huber), focused on the moral regeneration of a group of settlers on Norfolk Island.¹⁴ In addition to the first artwork (Wedgewood), poetry (Darwin), and fiction (Huber) produced in connection to the newly established thief colony, there appeared in London *A New Moral System of Geography* (1790) for children. This would be the first educational work to make mention of the settlement, with the publishers explaining in an Appendix that “Botany Bay being now a part of the world allotted for civilization, we have collected the following particulars respecting the geography of this new world, from the most accurate and authentic accounts we could find.”¹⁵ What followed were seven or so pages of ethnographic description of the native inhabitants, a discussion of the animals, fish, and climate, and a conclusion betraying the author’s commercial instincts, so far as it remarked on the lack of minerals, gems, or furs (the latter having been seen as a key part of Cook’s discoveries along the Pacific Northwest

¹³ Erasmus Darwin, *The Poetical Works of Erasmus Darwin*, London 1806, vol. 1, pp. 99–102. Emma Butler-Nixon has put together a nice narrative of this history, with clear images of the medallions and the abolitionist cameo, for the State Library of New South Wales, see www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/moulding-eligant-impression-primitive-earth.

¹⁴ A translation of Heyne’s Latin address by P.M. McCallum, alongside a careful comparison of the points raised by Heyne in tandem with Forster’s 1786 essay on Botany Bay can be found in: E.A. Judge, C.G. Heine’s Address on Roman Deportation: A 1791 Comparison with Botany Bay, in: *Ancient History*, vol. 29.2 (1999), pp. 118–158. Therese Huber’s book has been translated by Rodney Livingstone with an introduction and notes by Leslie Bodi: *Adventures on a Journey to New Holland*, Sydney 1966. Huber’s text drew from Forster’s knowledge of the Pacific and especially Norfolk Island, and she was explicit in revealing the main character, Rudolf, to have been an avatar for Forster himself. A good starting point for further discussion of her work is Lisa O’Connell, *Before Frankenstein: Therese Huber and the Antipodean Emergence of Political Fiction*, in: *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 23:3 (2020), pp. 348–359. Huber seems to have seen one of Wedgewood’s slave cameos for the first time in 1818, an experience that had an immediate impact on her subsequent abolitionist activities. See Sarah Lentz, *Abolitionists in the German Hinterland? Therese Huber and the Spread of Anti-slavery Sentiment in the German Territories in the Early Nineteenth Century*, in: Felix Brahm and Eve Rosenhaft (eds.), *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850*, Cambridge 2021, pp. 187–212.

¹⁵ *A New Moral System of Geography*, printed by S. Hazard for G. Riley, Bath 1790, p. 181.

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coastlines), and thus wondering out loud at the choice of the far-flung location in the first place.

At this point the “most accurate and authentic accounts” of the new colony would have been found in Robert Nares’s compilation of the reports submitted by the colony’s Governor, Arthur Phillip, and produced by John Stockdale in London in 1789. Published as *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay; with an Account of the Establishment of the Colonies of Port Jackson & Norfolk Island*, the book had an engraving of Wedgwood’s Sydney Cove medallion on its frontispiece and included Darwin’s poem after the publisher’s brief account of Wedgwood’s title of the vignette. Within months of its appearance, Georg Forster published a report on the book for German readers. At the time, Forster was undoubtedly best known for his narrative of Captain Cook’s second voyage to the South Pacific, but from our own vantage point it might be plausibly argued that Forster’s main contribution to the German reading public was the subsequent fifteen years spent by him translating and reviewing reports on the many activities undertaken in those years in service of science and empire. The busy year of 1789 was no different, with Forster publishing some twenty reviews, including, at Heyne’s insistence, an anonymous review of his *own* collection of short pieces connected to his time in the South Seas. Forster’s first review in 1790 was his account of Stockdale’s *Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*, which, given Forster’s detailed attention in it to the flora and fauna of the region, functioned as something of a sequel to his 1786 essay on Botany Bay (reproduced in the 1789 collection).

Following some opening remarks, Forster took time to carefully describe the frontispiece to Phillip’s *Voyage* for his readers. Wedgwood was already famous in Germany, enough so that it made news in Königsberg when Paul Collin, a former apprentice at the Etruria factory, had managed to replicate Wedgwood’s black porcelain, “und schon die Bildnisse verschiedener Personen, als des Herzoges und der Herzoginn von Kurland, des Oberpräsidenten von Damhard, des Hrn. Prof. Kant, u. a. m. darinn in basrelief ausgearbeitet.”¹⁶ Of Darwin’s companion poem included in the *Voyage*, Forster wrote that it was “eine Prophezeihung von künftiger Herrlichkeit der neuen Colonie” (GFW 11: 215). Forster went on to briefly outline Cook’s initial discovery of New Holland in 1770 before referring readers to his 1789 report on Watkin Tench’s unauthorized account of the new colony, which had appeared a few months ahead of the official one.

Here it is worth remarking on the intertextuality of Forster’s method when approaching his writing projects. Starting with a published review, Forster would go on to develop his thoughts in his letter exchanges with Heyne and others. This would often enough lead to a decision to undertake a translation of a piece, with an added editorial apparatus in the form of both elaborative and corrective footnotes. At this point Forster would typically produce a reflective preamble or postscript, and in rare instances write an additional standalone essay. In this vein, for scholars working on Forster and Kant’s dispute over racial determination, it is not enough to simply look at Forster’s 1786 essay on the topic (GFW 8: 130–156), since Forster in fact brooded over the issue in multiple letters at the time and then continued to think through matters indirectly in his pieces on Botany Bay, and in the long biographical preface he wrote to accompany the publication of his translation of the official narrative of Cook’s third voyage in 1787.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Physicalisch-Ökonomische Zeitung*, 5ts Stück, Februar 1785, p. 97. Collin’s portrayal of Kant can be seen here: users.manchester.edu/facstaff/ssnaragon/kant/helps/Life/IconData.html#1782Collin.

¹⁷ A concise account of Forster’s position on race viz. Kant can be found in: Ludwig Uhlig, Georg Forster und Herder, in: *Euphorion*, vol. 84 (1990), pp. 339–366, with comprehensive treatments by Michael Weingarten, *Menschenarten oder Menschenrassen. Die Kontroverse zwischen Georg Forster und Immanuel Kant*, in: Gerhard Pickerodt (ed.), *Georg Forster in seiner Epoche*, Berlin 1982, pp. 117–148, and Ludwig Uhlig, *Die Südseevölker und Georg Forsters Rassenbegriff*, in: *Georg-Forster-Studien* (2010), pp. 137–172.

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In these texts Forster was optimistic regarding the promise afforded by Britain’s Pacific expeditions, and he was, if not quite endorsing these as part of some kind of “civilizing mission,” certainly still hopeful regarding the advantages that could be gained for native inhabitants via a process of shared scientific and technological advancements. Forster was critical of what he took to be European romantic fantasies regarding the virtues and simplicity of Rousseau’s “noble savage,” for while he insisted that happiness was a state achieved by each of nature’s creatures in their own fashion—“the joy of life dwells to equal degree in the worm” (GFW 5: 161)—the merits of “civilized life” for comfort and thought could not be denied. As he put it in the essay on Botany Bay, “Cultural advancement is thus in the interests of mankind, and population of the whole earth with civilized inhabitants is the great goal which we above all see before us as worthy of our efforts” (GFW 5: 162). Forster’s hero in this process was “the immortal Cook,” a modern-day Columbus who had opened commercial trade on both sides of the Pacific and led to the creation of a new thief colony at Botany Bay. “Certainly the first settlers of New Holland are villainous rabble,” Forster acknowledged, but “it is sufficiently proved by ancient and modern history that he ceases to be an enemy of society whenever he regains his full human rights and becomes a proprietor and cultivator of land” (GFW 5: 163). Forster’s examples? Rome: “The robber band of the Seven Hills became through Numa’s precepts the most eminent and most and most admired people on earth” (GFW 5: 163); and America, for “[t]he descendants of the offenders who James I first sent to Virginia now hold rank and voice among the nations and have become through Franklin and Washington free allies of the mightiest European states” (5:164). Here Forster echoed sentiments voiced on both sides of the Channel regarding the prospects for the new colony, before going on to a detailed description of the nature of the place taken up from both Hawkesworth’s account, and whatever knowledge transfer had no doubt occurred during Forster’s own long journey with Cook on the second voyage. Remarking that the “The savages on the coast are of medium size, well-proportioned and stout, but not especially lively and, like all savages, inactive and lazy” (GFW 5: 174), Forster still believed that the site was ideal given the low number of natives, the natural resources, and the deep harbors suitable for landing crews and supplies (GFW 5: 179).

This approach was continued in the following year’s discourse on Cook, with the same optimism regarding the fruits of colonial commercial exchanges and settlement, and the firm belief in the advantages to be gained by a technology transfer from Europe to its colonies, with America cited once more as the “proof of concept” for this hope. Forster’s report on Tench’s unauthorized narrative stands out therefore, since here we see some wavering as Forster’s text summarized an increasing sense that the native inhabitants might be incurably resistant to the settler’s overtures: “Alle Bemühungen, ihr Vertrauen und ihre Freundschaft zu gewinnen, sind fruchtlos geblieben; Leichtsin, Mißtrauen, Unbeständigkeit, Indolenz und vielleicht Geringschätzung derer, die ihre Übermacht nicht fühlen lassen, vereiteln bey ihnen jeden Versuch zur Annäherung” (GFW 5: 167). And, still worse from Forster’s perspective, that the convicts had in some cases continued as before, stealing and wreaking havoc, such that a few had ultimately been hanged (GFW 5: 167).¹⁸ Governor Phillip returned to England shortly after its founding with mixed feelings regarding the experiment. And the effort to maintain a colony on Norfolk Island would be abandoned within a decade: not only was flax *not* abundant, the colony never became self-sustaining, requiring ships to routinely navigate treacherous bays in all but the calmest ocean conditions. Forster’s reserve after reading

¹⁸ As we read through Forster’s letters to Therese only a few years later in war torn Paris, the Mainz Jacobin seems to have become thoroughly disillusioned, with all of his former optimism and faith in humankind’s essential perfectibility gone. See on this especially: Christoph Bode, *Georg Forster in Paris (1794/94)*, in: *Litteraria Pragensia: Studies in Literature & Culture*, vol. 29, no. 57 (2019), pp. 60–74.

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Tench, in other words, was in some ways prescient of the many difficult years ahead for the new Etruria.

As we bring this case study from Kant’s time to a close, it should be clear by now that German audiences were deeply aware of the events happening in the broader world, and especially so with respect to Britain’s geopolitical maneuvering. Even as readers reveled in tales of exotic lands and the plucky adventurers who visited them, the narratives themselves were in fact a serious business, offering not just life-saving information to ships looking for safe harbors with fresh food and water, but blueprints for colonial expansion. In this way natural historical reports became also texts of socio-political significance. Scientific descriptions did not simply add to botanical knowledge, they also informed governments of prospects for commercial exchange and, in the case of Britain’s empire, of the possibilities for resource management across its many colonies. Joseph Banks’ decision to transplant breadfruit—as an “ideal” food for the enslaved—from the South Pacific to the West Indies, is just one example of this among many. In light of this, it is all the more important that philosophers pay close attention to the context within which the figures we study both lived and worked. We should reject efforts to distinguish between so-called “abstract” philosophical positions and the context within which they were generated. There is no such thing as “a view from nowhere,” and the effort to maintain belief in one reveals a desire to maintain the status quo in a field that still looks very much like it did when Kant and his colleagues mounted their own lecterns each week, ready to explain the great business of the world to their students.¹⁹

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¹⁹My thanks to Corey Beckford for his insights regarding this; personal communication, 10 August 2024. For an approach to Kant that starts from this viewpoint see Huaping Lu-Adler, *Kant, Race and Racism: The View from Somewhere*, Oxford 2023.