You and I, we and they: Encountering “the Other”, understanding oneself

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Introduction

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be here today at the opening of what promises to be a very interesting exhibition and conference. It is an occasion that marks the 375th anniversary of New Sweden, but it also provides us with an opportunity to reflect on some more general questions and issues that are as important for scholars of the past as they are for contemporary society in Sweden, America and elsewhere. What I will try to do in this talk is to highlight some of these larger issues and themes as a way of putting the individual contributions of the conference and the exhibition into a broader context.

I have also been asked to say something about my own area of research, Linnaean travel during the second half of the 18th century, from the perspective of cultural encounters and identity formation. Over the last few years I have studied the travelling students of Carl Linnaeus called his apostles, and in some respects that are relevant here they constitute a parallel of sorts to the case of New Sweden which I will get back to later. I should also add that previously I have done research on the images of China in Swedish travel accounts from the middle of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th, a study where some of the key questions concerned encounters with "the other" and what such encounters can tell us about identities on different levels.

As you will notice from this very brief presentation, my own research experience mainly belongs to a later time period than the one we are mainly concerned with here, the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. This can be a disadvantage in discussing in detail the various papers presented over the next few days, but there is perhaps also a point in being able to approach questions and issues that are similar but set in somewhat different historical circumstances. In this sense and in others, what follows can also be seen as an attempt to bridge the distance, as it were, between 1638 and 2013, to understand how and why the concerns of the time of New Sweden are also the concerns of today.

Here at the outset I would finally like to stress that this talk is intended as an introduction both to the conference and to the exhibition. For that reason I will keep my remarks on a general level that is accessible for everyone in attendance here today, including the non-specialists. But do not worry; I think we may safely assume that there will be plenty of more in-depth discussions for specialists in various fields during the individual sessions tomorrow and on Sunday. And also for those exchanges it can perhaps be useful to step back for a moment and reflect on their place in the bigger picture.

The challenge of diversity

I would like to start with a few more general remarks on the major themes that we will consider over the next few days. When reading the abstracts, what is striking is the great range and diversity of topics and approaches, and how many big questions in recent historical and archaeological scholarship they touch upon. Represented here are major research fields like cultural encounters, identity, and everyday life, theoretical and methodological concepts like materiality and modernity, and more historically specific but still very large and complex issues like colonialism – Swedish and other.

This variety is in itself appropriate, since I think it reflects different ways of approaching a common, fundamental theme. That theme is precisely the

challenge of diversity and how we as humans deal with it, now and in the past, with early modern Sweden and New Sweden as the empirical focal point. In this light, the conference and exhibition beginning today is related to the most fundamental aspects of humanities and social sciences research. In encountering "the other" we do indeed define and try to understand ourselves, and the issue of identity is by definition an existential one that raises many questions we will be discussing here:

What is it to be human, and what is it not? Who am I, who are you and how are we related to each other? Who are we, how do we differ from each other and in what ways are we the same? Who, or what, is "the other"?

Often the discussions about encounters with "the other" have revolved around the dichotomy of European vs. non-European peoples. It is primarily in the context of early modern and modern colonialism and imperialism that this perspective has ben applied, and for good reason. But a more nuanced understanding of identity and cultural encounters is emerging, where affiliations and the sense of belong are less rigid and more fluid, changing over time and also depending on specific contexts. To understand what this means in practice, and not least what material and other practices means for the making and remaking of identities, will thus be a major and recurring theme in our discussions over the next few days.

A changing story of "us"

Since this is both an academic and public occasion, having come this far it might be useful to remind ourselves of a basic distinction in the understanding of what history is. (Now I am not talking about history as a discipline, but in a broader sense.) In the minds of many people outside academia history is simply everything that happened, and the historian's task is to summarize these events as clearly and accurately as possible. Scholars themselves, of course, whether historians, archaeologists or others, understand history as being what we

remember of all that has happened – social memory, if you will. And the relationship between these two, all that happened and our knowledge of it, is far from simple or obvious.

What we remember is always a matter of choice, a result of conscious or unconscious decisions based on the interests and the concerns of the present. And not just any general interests and concerns, but ultimately quite fundamental ones. To put it very simply but, I think, accurately, history is always – in one way or the other – the story of “us”, an attempt to explain how "we" came to be. But while solving that problem is arguably the main task of archaeologists, historians and other scholars of the past, their work to do so is inevitably shaped by a specific idea of "us", of whose story it is they tell or ought to tell. And as the contemporary notions of identity and belonging change, and with them the definitions of "us" that dominate in specific contexts, so does the perspective from which we approach and understand the past.

For much of the past two hundred years, of course, the predominant "we" underpinning all of the historical disciplines has been the nation and the nation-state. The very idea of historical and archaeological research in its modern form evolved in close proximity to the development of nation-states, and its task became to explain the origins and eventual supremacy of this particular form of human collective. As a result, the entire framework of research institutions and infrastructure for scholarship on the past was organised along national boundaries and based upon the premise of the nation-state as the fundamental building block of historical study.

This state of affairs have changed rather drastically in the last few decades, although it is still a matter of debate how profound and lasting the changes will prove to be. It can be argued that much of historical scholarship and even more of archaeological research has always been international in scope, and currents such as "world history" did much to transcend national borders long ago.

However, often this work consisted in pursuing inter-national history in the literal sense of the word; it might have been global in scope but to a large extent it was still very much anchored in the nation-states as both start and end points. Or, more to the point, the nations as "we".

The recent turn toward global history and the history of globalization has attempted, and maybe to some extent succeeded, in breaking this pattern more decisively by focusing on specifically global connections within and across national boundaries. The defining "we" whose story is to be told have changed, at least in some regard, from the nation to humanity itself, as historians and others have tried to explain the age of globalization we now live in. This broader development is also clearly reflected in this conference and exhibition, were traditional, nation-based (not to mention nationalist) narratives are being challenged and complicated in various ways. The very diversity of topics, ranging from local taxation history to global cultural encounters, coming together in one and the same conference in itself is a sign of how previously separated fields of study are being related to each other in new and interesting ways.

Colonialism and Swedish history

While these arguments about the general meaning of research on the past and about the emergence of global history or archaeology may seem rather abstract, I think they constitute an important background for understanding the contemporary significance of the issues raised on this occasion. Especially in the more popular understanding of Swedish history, still today shaped by rather narrow national or European perspectives, there has been a strong tendency to deny Swedish involvement in phenomena such as colonialism, slavery or structural forms of racism.

Instead, Sweden has often been considered morally superior to other European nations in pursuing peaceful trade and science rather than conquest by military

means – at least after the loss of great power status in the early eighteenth century. This, for instance, has often very clearly been the light in which the travels of Linnaean naturalists have been seen, a topic I will return to soon. In Chinese-Swedish relations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a frequently recurring theme has also been the attempts by Swedish representatives to gain trade advantages from the Chinese by arguing their small-nation and non-colonial power status – while simultaneously benefitting from the rights and concessions secured by Great Britain and others through the use of military force or the threat thereof.

However, as a result of the shifts described earlier that have resulted in an approach to the past more based on global than national perspectives, these kinds of interpretation of Swedish history have begun to change. So far this may be mostly in scholarship and not so much in what we may call popular history. But just recently, there has been a debate with much media coverage about the history of slavery in the Swedish colony of St. Barthélemy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This was the result of some new research by historian Fredrik Thomasson in Stockholm, who along with others argued that Sweden will have to come to terms with its past involvement in colonialism, racism and slavery.

While the research findings were perhaps not much of a surprise to other scholars, it can only be a welcome development that these issues also come to public attention. At the same time, the discussion about St. Barthélemy raises some interesting questions about the importance of distinctions between different phenomena that we now consider ethically problematic. For instance, were New Sweden and St. Barthélemy “colonies” in the same sense and to the same degree? Were they equally “questionable” from the perspective of today’s realization that occupation and enslavement are crimes against basic human rights?

In answering these questions, I think that again it can be useful to reflect on the meaning of some of the key concepts. “Colony”, for instance, can mean many things, but two main definitions is conquered territory or a close group of foreign settlers living together in a location far from home. While St. Barthélemy was clearly a colony in the former sense, in reality New Sweden were in many ways a hybrid of the two, not quite one or the other. The relationships between Swedes, indigenous peoples and other European groups were thus more complicated than simple domination of one over the other. This is, in fact, one of the aspects that make New Sweden interesting for scholars wanting to study the complexities of cultural encounters and identities in the early modern era.

My point here is that, just as we should be careful in making generalizations about the essential characteristics of various “peoples”, we should also be careful not to use “colonialism” in a monolithic or essentialist way. It, too, was many different things in different places at different times, even though some factors were held in common. One thing to consider during the weekend’s discussion is the meaning of “colonization” in various contexts, just as terms such as “indigenous peoples”, “Europeans” and other labels should be used with caution. Having said that, it is a delicate balancing act, since we cannot become so cautious that we dare not say anything definite about anything at all.

Linnaean identities

With this I would like to turn to an interesting parallel to the case of New Sweden in the seventeenth century: the travelling students of Carl Linnaeus in the second half of the eighteenth century. They can also serve as a more concrete illustration of some of the more general arguments I have made so far in a field of research I am very familiar with. What I am talking about here is a group of 17 or 18 young men connected in various ways to Linnaeus, who travelled beyond Europe in order to collect and describe plants and animals. This group was responsible for a very large part of original Swedish printed travel accounts of non-European regions from the 1750s to the 1780s. Altogether, they represent a

unique mass of sources that, if used in the right way, can tell us much about Swedish encounters with "the other" on a global scale and thus also about identity formation during this time.

The history of these travellers was long told in a very Swedish and European perspective, and it was seen as a coherent project of the great Linnaeus, who has often been considered the pride of the Swedish nation. It has often been remarked that the prestige he enjoyed in a European context was important to Sweden in a time when it had recently been reduced from great power to small nation status. As we have seen, the role of Linnaean natural history was also considered as morally superior to the direct forms of colonialism exercised by many other European countries. Of course, Sweden also made attempts in that direction, and succeeded on a small scale with St. Barthélemy from the 1780s, but it has always been seen as a colony barely worth mentioning – even in earlier, more patriotic and nationalistic historiography.

In one sense, however, it cannot be denied that Linnaean natural history eventually became something of a global success. But not in bringing the economic rewards to Sweden that Linnaeus had promised, explicitly or implicitly, but in becoming an increasingly valuable tool in colonial exploration and exploitation by the great European powers. This development coincided with a shift of the centre of gravity of Linnaean science from Uppsala to cities like Paris and, most of all, London, where it became a core element in a process of knowledge collection and accumulation that was crucial for the evolution of colonialism and later the new imperialism on a global scale.

The literature on this kind of issues – the close relationship between natural history, especially botany, colonialism and global capitalism – has grown rapidly over the last 10–15 years. And as we will see during the conference, the Swedish travelling naturalists can be used to illuminate these processes, but only if we let go of old myths rooted in nationalist and Eurocentric historiography. We have to

see these travellers on the one hand as individuals with similarities and differences, and on the other as acting in a global, constantly changing context. They had a common background in some regards, but they took different routes in life; in early years their journeys were planned from Sweden and was often connected with the Swedish East India trade or conducted with the support of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, but later they became increasingly related to European colonial exploration. As already suggested, this gradual shift was accompanied by the Europeanization and eventual globalization of Linnaean natural history.

And most of all, these travels engendered a great deal of encounters with “the other” in all kinds of situations with all kinds of people around the world. Like few other Swedes at the time, the students of Linnaeus were confronted with their own notions of identity and belonging in many different ways, which means that their writings as a whole make up a remarkably rich source on cultural encounters and identity formation. While many separate, individual studies have been made, as of yet no one has tried to analyse more systematically the similarities and differences between these travellers in how they experienced and described their meetings with “the other”. This is a shame, since I think we can learn much from them about identities at this time from a whole range of perspectives: national, gender, ethnic, religious and so on.

And I think “identities”, in plural, is very important here. Much previous research has focused on particular identities, in the context of postcolonial studies often emphasizing the European dimension above all others, but while this is important it seems clear that it was not the only identity that mattered to the Linnaeans. They were also Swedes in relation to other European nations, men in relation to women, Lutherans in their encounter with Catholics or Buddhists and – not least important to them – Linnaeans in relation to other and competing schools of thought in natural history. While we today may disregard all these others as less significant than the dichotomy of European and non-European, if

nothing else it is important to understand how they affected their sense of European identity since all these affiliations influenced each other in complicated ways.

Another aspect from which we can learn much is the differences between the various individuals, where it seems clear to me that it is sometimes too easy to perceive the Linnaeans as a homogeneous group – and especially to think that, for instance, the position of Linnaeus himself on questions of racial categorizations of human beings was shared by all his students. If anything, there were great variations between them; Anders Sparrman, for instance, was and is well-known as one of the most vocal opponents of slavery of the age while others, like Carl Peter Thunberg or Pehr Kalm cared very little for the dignity of non-European peoples since their only interest seems to have been the benefits of their endeavours for European science or the Swedish economy.

Finally, as Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out, from a gender perspective there was an interesting tension within Linnaean natural history. On the one hand there was a markedly patriarchal character to it, with Linnaeus as a father figure in Uppsala and the students his loyal sons who travelled the world on his behalf. (This emphasis on the personal role of Linnaeus in all their journeys I might not agree with, but that is another matter.) On the other hand the figure or the ideal of the naturalist was androgynous, decidedly non-combatant and thus not masculine in the same way as the exploring "heroes" of later ages. This seems like an accurate observation, and clearly much remains to be done in the study of gender aspects of early modern natural history.

Conclusion

The overall argument I have been trying to make here is to emphasize the range of positions rather than simple and monolithic views of "the other" or of the world in general. What is analytically interesting, if we want to understand the processes of identity formation and the role that cultural encounters play in

those, is these more complicated patterns and relationships between different loyalties and identifications. To me it is encouraging that precisely these complications is what so many of the conference papers seem to be grappling with, in the process moving beyond simple characterizations and generalizations in either direction.

This touches upon a final aspect I would like to mention again, which is the encounter with "the other" that we as scholars experience when engaging with the past. In a sense, what we are doing to the historical sources is what they are doing to the "others" that they are describing. We are conveying an impression of these people that may be more or less well-founded, more or less generalized and simplified, more or less of an "other" in the strong sense of that term. What we often criticize, explicitly or implicitly, in the people of the past is the tendency of seeing identities as homogenous, static and essential in nature. The very least we can do, then, is that no matter how worthy our motivations are we do not make the same mistake ourselves.

Ultimately, we face the same challenge of diversity as the indigenous peoples of New Sweden or the travelling students of Linnaeus. It is a challenge that forces us to search for patterns in the past while recognizing complexity, to acknowledge existing power relations without denying that all human beings possess their own agency, and to make distinctions between similar but different phenomena without relativizing phenomena like colonialism or racism in any historical context.

Thank you!