

The Materiality of Research: Sinking into the Sand: Explorations of the Coast in Sociology by Nick Osbaldiston

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*In this feature essay, **Nick Osbaldiston** proposes the notion of a **sociology of the coast**, linking pre-modern divisions between the 'known' land and 'unknown' sea to more contemporary anxieties as the spectre of climate change threatens our coastal futures. By engaging in the imaginative play enabled by actually 'being there', this allows us to contemplate the pressing, future possibilities of the coast today.*

This essay is part of a series examining the material cultures of academic research, reading and writing. If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the Managing Editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at lseviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk.

The Materiality of Research: Sinking into the Sand: Explorations of the Coast in Sociology



Coast looking south from Rex Lookout in Far North Tropical Queensland (Image Credit: Author)

Growing up in Australia, coasts were an intrinsic part of my identity and lifestyle. Early memories of travelling from Brisbane to the Gold Coast bring to my mind not only flashes of images of sand, sun and surf, but also remind me of other sensations, such as the smell of the salty air, the taste of fish and chips for lunch and the sounds of waves crashing on the shore while seagulls squabble over scraps from leftover takeaway meals.

It is probably no coincidence, then, that I have been working lately on several projects to do with the coast, including developing a sociology of the coast. For me, the coast is not simply the sand that we feel beneath our feet, but the aesthetics of everyday life that we experience on the shore itself. Some coasts are crowded spaces (such as our Gold Coast here in Queensland), whereas others are unpopulated and locked by heritage/conservation laws. The point here is that coasts are spaces that are filled with different activities, many narrated by cultural expectations that often have a nationalist tinge to them. From slow beach-walking to bird-watching, social action on the coast has been of interest to me for some time.

Methodologically Speaking: Looking Through Past Eyes

I have been fortunate enough to have worked on coastal projects since arriving in academia, including my postdoctoral research fellowship on [climate change adaptation](#). Recently I was taken by an article by David Inglis on the [fate of sociology today](#). In this excellent critique of how we 'do' sociology, Inglis argues that we have become largely ahistorical in our theoretical understanding of the world we occupy. Rather than interrogating the past to examine the distinctions we have in our contemporary period, we tend to allow other grand social theories to explain our social settings for us.

Struck by this, I embarked on my own studies of the coast, examining the Judeo-Christian heritage of how our premodern forebears might have viewed their relationship with it. As Max Weber famously quipped, however, in his 'interpretive sociology', '[one need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar](#)'. In relation to the coast, historian Alain Corbin states something similar in his book *The Lure of the Sea* when he comments that: 'There is no other means for understanding people from the past than attempting to see through their eyes and live with their feelings' (vii).

When it comes to how our western predecessors understood the coast, however, we have some hints here and there that can help us. Mythological meetings between supernatural forces that sometimes erupted in violence on the beach plague our histories (see, for instance, Lena Lenček and Gideon Bosker's historical analysis, *The Beach* (1998)). But from a Judeo-Christian lens, the coast is that barrier between the 'known' and the largely 'unknown' sea. Augustine, for instance, saw the sea as the disordered, whereas land was the unified. Furthermore, Matthew Henry, the biblical scholar, argued that the sea was the opposite to God's order: chaotic and held at bay by the coast. Chrysostom also contended that the sea was limitless and represented the unknown wisdom of deity. Of course, underpinning this is the great flood in which the sea destroyed humanity and was evidence of supernatural control. As Corbin argues: 'It was on this shore, more than anywhere else, that Christians could come and contemplate the traces of the Flood, meditate upon that ancient punishment, and experience signs of divine wrath' (9).



Image Credit: Cozumel, Mexico (Steve Sutherland CC BY 2.0)

It takes a certain amount of imaginative play to take yourself back to that time period in which the coast was largely a place between the fear of the unknown and the safety of the land. However, as I sat writing ethnographic notes about how people use the coast today, it is not difficult to look out at the limitless expanse of the ocean as it reaches the horizon and place yourself into the shoes of the premodern person. The horrors of mythologies, the great deluge, the idea that once this sea was used to destroy, instills in your own heart a sense of awe but also dread – the sublime, if you like. It is in those moments that you can begin to compare how we experience the coast today to that feeling of trepidation over the water that laps at the shoreline.

Contemporary Coasts: The Disordered Again?

Today, through the rationalisation of coasts and through the efforts of explorers like Matthew Flinders, our coasts are largely ‘known’. There is still so much we do not know about oceans socially (though there is increasing interest in ‘immersion’ and the relationship between [oceans and people](#)), but we no longer seem to live in such fear of them. As I spend time exploring coastal towns and hamlets, I’m struck by the consistency of material culture that exists, especially in Australia. Frequently there are coastal resorts, golf courses, high rises right on the water’s edge, marinas, retail outlets and, of course, fish and chip shops.

The sociologist in me wanders around taking notes, impressed with how intuitive we have become and how much we have rejected the mythologies of the past. But of course, it would have to be argued that we live vulnerably. Ulrich [Beck \(1992\)](#) might have stated that we are now ‘afraid’ more than ever; but there is little evidence of this in how we develop our coasts. Recently in Australia, coastal properties were inundated by sea water as a [large East Coast Low system](#) crossed the boundaries between the ‘ordered’ and ‘disordered’ once more. Residents were astounded to realise how powerful these storms could be and how much damage the sea could actually do.

However, due to our propensity for romanticising coastal living, we have neglected several aspects of the coast. [Barbara Adam](#) asks us to consider the future in our sociology, so that we might ask the question ‘what should happen’ *now* to avoid minimising choices later. Some might suggest this is related to [the precautionary principle](#). But again, sitting on the coast looking out at the vast expanse of the Coral Sea where I live, I cannot help but imagine what our coasts might look like in a climate-changed future. While we have estimates about how much the seas will [rise](#), these are at best just that. We have returned to a state where what we know about the future is largely

unknown. As one examines the material culture of our coastal developments, including the massive amounts of infrastructure we have built there (especially in Australia), the sense that we have no idea what the sea might do becomes highly emotive, leaving you feeling vulnerable: once again, the ocean becomes the sublime.

The point of this essay, however, is not so much to argue about how coastal development is inappropriate, but more to suggest that the imaginative play that we should engage with to understand our premodern forebears – and also perhaps to contemplate our futures when complemented with the materiality of being ‘in place’ using sights, sounds, smells and tastes – affords us an opportunity to consider, alongside what information we have, broader and deeper reflections on how we theorise these things. The ability to actually *be there* creates emotions that are required to not only historicise our theory better, but also to give us pause to consider future possibilities now.

This has underpinned my own research and development of a *sociology of the coast*. While we have several pieces, including the now well-cited [Places on the Margin](#) by Rob Shields, that investigate the beach, there have been few interrogations of the ways in which coastal places have more generally evolved from premodern to contemporary times. Theoretically, I have been inclined towards Weber’s work on rationalisation and disenchantment by looking at how coastal explorers sought to map coasts in such a way that they were made *known* and *ordered*. However, as Weber also argues, modernity produces different types of rationalities that often compete against one another. In some instances, as I have found in my work, coasts are battlegrounds for these as visions of what coasts should look like conflict with other views (especially those of coastal developers) of what coasts are useful for. Nevertheless, the spectre of climate change haunts our coastal futures. In the workings of a sociology of the coast, we should be inclined towards asking not simply what might happen, but what ought to happen for intergenerational equity and adaptation options that are feasible and for long-term strategies for population safety.

Nick Osbaldiston is a lecturer in sociology at James Cook University in Cairns and is the author of *Seeking Authenticity in Place, Culture and Self* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and co-editor of *Understanding Lifestyle Migration* (with Michaela Benson, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). His work predominantly focuses on internal migration patterns to coastal locations and more recently is focused on risks associated with environmental dangers such as flooding and coastal inundation. Nick is also presently compiling a new monograph on a sociology of the coast earmarked for publication in 2017.

Note: Thank you to Nick Osbaldiston for providing images for this feature essay. This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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