

The Cosmos of Alexander von Humboldt from a Cosmopolitan Perspective

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Abstract The aim of this text is to ask, with Humboldt, how the ethics of nature and social life, the cosmos (the relationship between things, the forces of nature and the whole) and cosmopolitanism (the relationship between human beings) are intrinsically correlated. In the first part of this paper, which focuses on the notion of the cosmos, I want to analyze this intrinsic relation between the cosmos and cosmopolitanism first by appreciating that there is freedom, history, and dignity in nature, then by considering the resulting ecological paradigm, and finally, through apprehending the beauty of nature. In the second part, which centers on the notion of cosmopolitanism, this relationship is analyzed first through Humboldt's critique of colonialism, then through his criticism of cultural domination, and finally, via his conception of humanity. This will demonstrate the relevance of Humboldt's project for the present day¹.

Keywords Alexander von Humboldt; cosmos; cosmopolitanism

1 Introduction

When a US edition of his study on Cuba (Humboldt 1970 3:345–501) was published in 1856 without the chapter in which he criticized the slave system, Alexander von Humboldt affirmed his belief that this part of his writing was much more important

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than his other scientific work.² The chapter was one of the most highly prized documents for abolitionists, particularly in the days leading up to the 1861 civil war (Kossok 1982, 13). A year later, in 1857, the “Law of the Blacks” (*Negergesetz*), according to which any slave who entered Prussia (with or without his master) immediately became free, was promulgated due to his initiative.³ The struggle for justice characterizes the entire life and work of Humboldt who, in 1790, at the age of 21, and alongside his friend Georg Forster, collaborated with the revolutionaries in France. Until the end of his life, Humboldt fought against the slavery of Black people and the oppression of indigenous people in Latin America, as well as the persecution of political dissidents and Jews in Prussia.

His five-year journey in Latin America in the company of the French botanist Aimé Bonpland was initially for the purpose of research in the natural sciences. This was the first expedition of its kind without any colonization ambitions and was financed completely by his own resources. Humboldt and Bonpland sought to study nature on the new continent in order to find elements to aid in the comprehension of the cosmos. Their aim was to make the Universe readable. Rather than seeking to dominate nature, they wanted to hear its message and to be overwhelmed by its beauty.

We could ask here, with Humboldt, how the ethics of nature and social life, the cosmos (the relationship between things, the forces of nature and the whole), and cosmopolitanism (the relationship between human beings) are intrinsically correlated. In the first part of this paper, which focuses on the notion of the cosmos, I want to analyze this intrinsic relation between the cosmos and cosmopolitanism first by appreciating that there is freedom, history, and dignity in nature, then by considering the resulting ecological paradigm, and finally, through apprehending the beauty of nature. In the second part, which centers on the notion of cosmopolitanism, this relationship is analyzed first through Humboldt’s critique of colonialism, then through his criticism of cultural domination, and finally, via his conception of humanity. This will demonstrate the relevance of Humboldt’s project for the present day.

- 2 “Auf diesen Teil meiner Schriften lege ich eine weit größere Wichtigkeit als auf die mühevollen Arbeiten astronomischer Ortsbestimmungen, magnetischer Intensitätsversuche oder statistische Angaben” (quoted by Kossok 1982, 13).
- 3 Humboldt writes to Boeckh on December 29, 1857: “Ich habe zustande gebracht, was mir am meisten am Herzen lag, das von mir lang geforderte Negergesetz: Jeder Schwarze wird frei werden, sobald er preußischen Boden berührt” (Hoffmann 1901, 416).

2 Cosmos

Humboldt's goal was not to discover plants and animals that were hitherto unknown to Europeans—even if he did classify more than 12,000 new species. Rather his search of the unknown was motivated by the desire to explain what was in fact close but incomprehensible, precisely because it had become isolated from the network to which it belongs. All natural, cultural, and social phenomena are interrelated: the continents, the oceans, the atmosphere, the vegetation, the stars, as well as worldviews and the arts, must be studied as a whole.⁴ This is a whole that can never be abstracted from the singular.⁵ In opposition to the scientific methodology of his time, which was hierarchical and based on a first principle that supports the whole, Humboldt presents a notion of a complex network in which each element is as important as the other.⁶ Finally, from a knowledge and love of nature and the pleasure its beauty brings, and a sense that this must be protected and preserved, stems a desire for justice in the distribution of resources and goods, a respect for universal rights, and a recognition of reciprocity between different forms of life, culture, and art. It would therefore be impossible to isolate a phenomenon and to consider it outside the influence of others. Even if each phenomenon has its own dimensions and logic, it relates to others in a network, which constitutes an organic whole. Humboldt's natural studies, classification, and measurements, as well as his social, artistic, cultural, political, and economic research, make up the theory of the cosmos, which connects all of these different spheres. It is therefore necessary to discover the complex relations of interdependence between these natural and cultural phenomena. And the most difficult relations to understand are those between what is near and what is furthest away (and therefore appears to be most strange), as well as between the present and the past.

2.1 Nature: *Freedom, History, Dignity*

Humboldt challenges the distinction between the human kingdom, in which there is freedom, history, and dignity, and the kingdom of nature, where we might not expect to find these qualities. For Humboldt, freedom and history exist in nature, but in a different sense than in the human kingdom: each natural region is unique,

- 4 “Was mir den Hauptantrieb gewährte, war das Bestreben die Erscheinungen der körperlichen Dinge in ihrem allgemeinen Zusammenhange, die Natur als ein durch innere Kräfte bewegtes und belebtes Ganze aufzufassen” (Humboldt 2004, 3).
- 5 “Ohne den ersten Hang nach der Kenntnis des Einzelnen alle große und allgemeine Weltanschauung nur ein Luftgebilde sein könne” (Humboldt 2004, 3).
- 6 “So führt den wissbegierigen Beobachter jede Classe von Erscheinungen zu einer anderen, durch welche sie begründet wird oder die von ihr abhängt” (Humboldt 2004, 3).

comprising a singular network of relations between organic and inorganic elements, of lights, colors, and musicalities (singing birds, sounds of animals, water flowing and falling on the rocks, winds in the vegetation, etc.), and is always in a process of transformation. The connection between everything that exists, as well as between what exists in the present and in the past, goes beyond an abstract system of universal laws. Reason links all empirical data without forgetting each singularity and its mutations in time. The best apprehension of all these simultaneous relationships is achieved through images, or “paintings of nature” (*Naturgemälde*). But each moment that is grasped is only a transitory moment: being (*Sein*) is a becoming (*Werden*), nature is becoming (*Werden*), and each being is something that has become (*Gewordenes*). The “physical description of the world” (*physische Weltbeschreibung*) first observes what exists together in space and the reciprocal influence of the forces of nature, but this is not distinguishable from “becoming” (*Werden*).⁷ Thus, it would not suffice to study nature through laboratory experiments, which could not reconstruct all of these relationships and transformations. It is necessary instead to go directly to nature to understand the singular constellations of each natural region, which cannot be reproduced elsewhere. This nature, in which, we now recognize, there is freedom and history, also has a dignity. This dignity means that nature is not an end in itself, or a means to another end; nor is it in the service of human beings. The science of nature thus contains an ethics of nature.

The new conception of experimentation that results from this has both a technical and a moral dimension. Experimentation is incapable of grasping the organic whole. Humboldt’s *physische Weltbeschreibung* includes both “the things and forces” and the “whole” of nature. His cosmos comprehends terrestrial (telluric) and cosmic (uranological) phenomena, while also perceiving a beautiful, harmonious, and perfect order.⁸

Humboldt also shares an ideal that is common to all of the various theories which, in spite of their divergences, are considered to belong to Romanticism: the unity of knowledge. It is not possible to isolate knowledges from one another: all knowledge is, on the contrary, multi- and transdisciplinary; the isolation of disciplines is therefore a scientific equivocation. This totality of knowledge is organic, but it is the mind that captures the “unity in diversity,” the *cosmos* itself. If each part has some autonomy, it is important to understand how it relates to each of the others, as well as to a whole that does not impose itself on these individual parts, since the influence between the parts and the whole is reciprocal (Köchy 2002, 6).

7 “Das Seiende ist aber, im Begreifen der Natur, nicht von dem Werden absolut zu scheiden” (Humboldt 2004, 34).

8 “Physische Weltbeschreibung ist Betrachtung alles Geschaffenen, alles Seienden im Raume (der Natur-Dinge und Natur-Kräfte) als eines gleichzeitig bestehenden Natur-Ganzen” (Humboldt 2004, 27).

As opposed to the external perspective on the science of nature, which considers it as conditioned and static, the difference between unconditioned productivity (or the producer) (*natura naturans*) and conditioned product (*natura naturata*) is abolished in Humboldt's model. His philosophy of nature aims to move beyond an external and objective perspective of nature, considering its internal and non-objective motor. From here derives the double constitution of nature as both static and dynamic: it is undone and yet remains; each of its destroyed products are reproduced again. By differentiation and individualization, opposing poles are constituted, while also remaining linked in an organic unit. While the understanding, that is, rational and discursive reflection, perceives the discontinuity of products, the intuition grasps the unity within the difference, the identity between productivity and product, and the reciprocal relationship between all parts—the whole to which human beings also belong (Köchy 2002, 6–7).

The Humboldtian project of the “description of the world” (*Weltbeschreibung*) differs from the “explanation of the world” (*Welterklärung*). The observation and description of things in detail, an empirical procedure, is distinct from an understanding of the causal relationship with the whole, which is always on the horizon, and which is grasped by a broader, more formal and abstract, theoretical perspective. Thus, this mediation between the abstract general and the particular is different from a logical system based on internal analogies, and also different from a formal abstraction which ignores the specific context (Köchy 2002, 8–9). Neither should it be confused with an induction from empirical elements, nor with a deduction from speculative principles.⁹ Humboldt thus refuses any dogmatic system, be it inductive or deductive, or any relativism that sees nature as chaos, contingency, and exception. He refuses both an encyclopedic assemblage and an exposition of fragments. But unlike in Romanticism, where only the philosophy of nature and poetry can grasp the whole, this apprehension is at the heart of Humboldt's conception of natural science (Köchy 2002, 9–10).

Nature as a whole, however, escapes empirical knowledge. The variousness of the phenomena that constitute the cosmos allows for rational, connected thinking only in the form of *reflection*. The experimental sciences are never complete, since the unity of the concept of nature is not based on sensory experience.¹⁰ The connection between

9 “In meinen Betrachtungen über die wissenschaftliche Behandlung einer allgemeinen Weltbeschreibung ist nicht die Rede von Einheit durch Ableitung aus wenigen, von der Vernunft gegebenen Grundprinzipien. Was ich physische Weltbeschreibung nenne (die vergleichende Erd- und Himmelskunde), macht daher keine Ansprüche auf den Rang einer rationellen Wissenschaft der Natur; es ist die denkende Betrachtung der durch Empirie gegebenen Erscheinungen, als eines Naturganzen” (Humboldt 2004, 22).

10 “Wir sind [...] weit von dem Zeitpunkt entfernt, wo man es für möglich halten konnte alle unsere sinnlichen Anschauungen zur Einheit des Naturbegriffs zu konzentrieren [...]. In vielen Gruppen der Erscheinungen müssen wir uns freilich noch mit dem Auffinden von empirischen

nature's various parts does not exist in linear form; rather, it exists as a network. Nature is not an aggregate, but a self-organizing system. Beyond experimentation, we must progress to formulate empirical laws. To enter into the network of an organism is to enter into a labyrinth, and this multiplicity always produces new surprises.¹¹ Such surprises are the drivers for further research. Nature reveals itself to be in a state of perpetual development. The infinite task of the research unit results in a joyful awareness of the effort required to grasp infinity (Köchy 2002, 11).¹²

Relationships in the present are the subject of the "description of the world," while those related to the transition of time, namely the relationship between past and present, are the subject of "world history."¹³ But because there is no separation between being and becoming, there is also no distinction between the description of nature and the history of nature.¹⁴ Rather, the description of nature is possible only as a history of nature, just as being can only be fully known as having become (Humboldt 2004, 35).¹⁵ Both the "world history" (*Weltgeschichte*) and the "physical description of the world" (*physische Weltbeschreibung*) cannot be inferred from concepts or principles, but rather must originate from an empirical understanding of what is singular in reality.

Therefore, as there is a close connection between the singular case and the scientific law, between the feelings that nature provokes in us and the science of nature, and between history and nature, there is also no absolute distinction between *Geist* and *Natur* and between *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft*. The difference between *Natur* and *Geist*, and between *Natur* and *Kunst*, should not lead to the constitution of independent fields that make the interconnection between them disappear from view. Since science begins when the mind (*Geist*) and reason organize elements of experience, *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft* are in an intrinsic relationship.

Gesetzen begnügen; aber das höchste, seltener erreichte Ziel aller Naturforschung ist daserspähendes Kausalzusammenhanges selbst" (Humboldt 2004, 389).

- 11 "In dem wundervollen Gewebe des Organismus, in dem ewigen Treiben und Wirken der lebendigen Kräfte führt allerdings jedes tiefere Forschen an den Eingang neuer Labyrinth" (Humboldt 2004, 18).
- 12 "Was der Geistesarbeit, deren Schranken hier bezeichnet werden, großes und feierliches inwohnt, ist das frohe Bewusstsein des Strebens nach dem Unendlichen, nach dem Erfassen dessen, was in ungemessener, unerschöpflicher Fülle das Seiende, das werdende, das Geschaffene uns offenbart" (Humboldt 2004, 389).
- 13 "Wie eine physische Weltgeschichte, wenn die Materialien dazu vorhanden wären, im weitesten Sinne des Wortes die Veränderungen schildern sollte, welche im Laufe der Zeiten der Kosmos durchwandert hat [...], so schildert dagegen die physische Weltbeschreibung das Zusammen-Bestehende im Raume, das gleichzeitige Wirken der Naturkräfte und der Gebilde, die das Produkt dieser Kräfte sind" (Humboldt 2004, 34).
- 14 "In diesem Sinne wären Naturbeschreibung und Naturgeschichte nicht gänzlich voneinander zu trennen" (Humboldt 2004, 34).
- 15 "Das Sein wird in seinem Umfang und inneren Sein vollständig erst als ein Gewordenes erkannt" (Humboldt 2004, 35).

There is a connection between the scientific description of nature in the natural frameworks of the cosmos (*Naturgemälde*) and the poetic description of nature through the imagination and in landscape paintings.¹⁶

2.2 Ecological Concern

Humboldt wanted to show the interconnection and interdependence of natural phenomena, forces of nature, inorganic and organic things—how all plants are linked together, as well as all animals. This is what we would today call *ecology*. It is not simply a question of a “unity of nature” that ignores difference, but of a “unity in diversity” that depends on the rich diversity of nature. Each herb, each insect, plays a crucial role within any given ecosystem; every ecosystem depends on biodiversity. The expression Humboldt uses—“geographic region”—designates what we would today call an ecosystem. Humboldt does not use the words “biodiversity” and “ecosystem,” but it is in the same sense as these terms that he emphasizes the interconnection of nature: no plant, no animal is an isolated specimen; each one is part of the web of life; even phenomena that are often overlooked, such as the mosquitoes that we find so irritating, have their fundamental place in the network of nature. Each region of the earth depends on the combination of infinite factors, such as the outline of the mountains and hills, the physiognomy of plants and animals, the sky, the clouds, the atmosphere. This is why life must be respected in its abundance, and why understanding the cosmos is only possible for those who can contemplate the variety of nature, in the sense of what we today call biodiversity (Sachs 2003, 128–130).¹⁷

16 “Man mag nun die Natur dem Bereich des Geistes entgegensetzen, als wäre das Geistige nicht auch in den Naturganzen enthalten, oder man mag die Natur der Kunst entgegenstellen, letztere in einem höheren Sinne als den Inbegriff aller geistigen Produktionskraft der Menschheit betrachtet; so müssen diese Gegensätze doch nicht auf eine solche Trennung des Physischen vom Intellektuellen führen, dass die Physik der Welt zu einer bloßen Anhäufung empirisch gesammelter Einzelheiten herabsinke. Wissenschaft fängt erst an, wo der Geist sich des Stoffes bemächtigt, wo versucht wird, die Masse der Erfahrungen einer Vernunftkenntnis zu unterwerfen: sie ist der Geist, zugewandt zu der Natur. Die Außenwelt existiert aber nur für uns, indem wir sie in uns aufnehmen, indem sie sich in uns zu einer Naturanschauung gestaltet. So geheimnisvoll unzertrennlich als Geist und Sprache, der Gedanke und das befruchtende Wort sind, ebenso schmilzt, uns selbst gleichsam unbewusst, die Außenwelt mit dem Innersten im Menschen, mit dem Gedanken und der Empfindung zusammen [...]. Die intellektuelle Tätigkeit übt sich dann an dem durch die sinnliche Wahrnehmung überkommenen Stoffe” (Humboldt 2004, 36–37).

17 “Je tiefer man eindringt in das Wesen der Naturkräfte, desto mehr erkennt man den Zusammenhang von Phänomenen, die lange, vereinzelt und oberflächlich betrachtet, jeglicher Anreihung zu widerstreben schienen [...] Meine Zuversicht gründet sich auf den glänzenden Zustand der Naturwissenschaften selbst, deren Reichtum nicht mehr die Fülle, sondern die Verkettung des Beobachteten ist. [...] Was in einem engeren Gesichtskreis, in unserer Nähe, dem forschenden

Humboldt explains how the gradual decline of Lake Valencia was caused by the destruction of forests and the cultivation of indigo. Human intervention reduced the level of the lake: the diversion of water for the cultivation of indigo was one cause, but deforestation was the most significant factor. Without the roots of the trees, the ground no longer had the ability to retain water, and so could not recharge the springs that fed the lake. Flooding and soil erosion increased. The destruction of trees made it difficult for future generations to meet their needs for fuel and water.¹⁸

The humans in Humboldt's account treat nature in a rather destructive way, triggering catastrophic and irreversible natural consequences: the ground becomes dry, for instance, when the number of trees protecting it decreases. Humboldt analyzes in detail several natural processes. In Guyana, he built an oven which could retain heat, reducing the need to burn wood and thus alleviating the burden for the slaves who had to maintain the fire (Humboldt 1970, 40).

Humboldt shares with *Enlightenment* thinking the idea that knowledge should be transmitted to the people and that science should be popularized. He recounted his journey in the salons (especially during a series of conferences in a Parisian salon), in scientific institutions (such as his lectures on physical geography as a member of the Prussian Academy), and at public conferences (like the popular conferences he held for free in the *Sing-Akademie* of Berlin). He brought his knowledge of the New World to specialists and educated people as well as to those who, although uneducated, were interested in listening to him. *Kosmos* became the best-selling popular science book of the nineteenth century. All of his texts are written to be understood by both scientists

Geiste lange unerklärlich blieb, wird oft durch Beobachtungen aufgeheilt, die auf einer Wanderung in die entlegensten Regionen angestellt worden sind. Pflanzen- und Thier-Gebilde, die lange isoliert erschienen, reihen sich durch neu entdeckte Mittelglieder oder durch Übergangsformen aneinander. Eine allgemeine Verkettung, nicht in einfacher linearer Richtung, sondern in netzartig verschlungenem Gewebe, nach höherer Ausbildung oder Verkümmern gewisser Organe, nach vielseitigem Schwanken in der relativen Übermacht der Theile, stellt sich allmählig dem forschenden Natursinn dar" (Humboldt 2004, 22–23).

- 18 "Zerstört man die Wälder, wie die europäischen Siedler aller Orten in Amerika mit unvorsichtiger Hast tun, so versiegen die Quellen oder nehmen doch stark ab. Die Flussbetten liegen einen Teil des Jahres über trocken und werden zu Strömen, sooft im Gebirge starker Regen fällt. Da mit dem Holzwuchs auch Rasen und Moos auf den Bergkuppen verschwinden, wird das Regenwasser in seinem Ablauf nicht mehr aufgehalten; statt langsam durch allmähliches Einsickern die Bäche zu speisen, zerfurcht es in der Jahreszeit der starken Regenniederschläge die Berghänge, schwemmt das losgerissene Erdreich fort und verursacht plötzliche Hochwässer, welche nun die Felder verwüsten. Daraus geht hervor, dass die Zerstörung der Wälder, der Mangel an fortwährend fließenden Quellen und die Existenz von Torrenten drei Erscheinungen sind, die in ursächlichem Zusammenhang stehen. Länder in entgegengesetzten Hemisphären, die Lombardei [...] und Nieder-Peru [...], liefern einleuchtende Beweise für die Richtigkeit dieses Satzes. Bis zur Mitte des vorigen Jahrhunderts waren die Berge, in denen die Täler von Aragua liegen, bewaldet" (Humboldt 1999, 70–71).

and laypersons. But if science is to have a social conscience, it does not mean that it must have immediate utility.¹⁹

2.3 The Beauty of Nature

Nature, finally, is beautiful: it stirs the soul. The natural object, without action or intention, transforms the subject who contemplates it, intensifying one's feelings and awakening the imagination. And the book of nature must contain both an objective part and a subjective part: this latter part is the inner world, built by the impressions that nature provokes within oneself.

We will not be able to know nature in all of its depth by looking at it coldly and distantly: such looking would allow us only to grasp it in superficial, mechanical ways. The most intimate knowledge of nature is only possible for one who faces its infinity. Nature is measured but also felt; we lose our sense and direction in nature, and then we recover it with even more energy. Reason and feeling do not exclude one another and, in their synthesis, one does not precede the other; rather, they influence each other reciprocally: the more I know nature, the more it fascinates me, and the more it fascinates me, the better I want to know it.²⁰

One may wonder how it is possible to find the properties of art—such as surprise, the unexpected, the inaccurate, and the fantastical—within nature. However, these elements do not contradict the representation of nature; on the contrary, they intensify the effects, the pleasures, and the upheaval that nature provokes. The reader has feelings and images that will leave a memory of what they have not known, and a desire to see what they have never seen. In poetry, the force of words produces, in the imagination of the reader, pictures that provoke the same inner effects as nature. It is the *hypotypose*—a feature of ancient rhetoric—which became one of Humboldt's most important techniques (Ette 2002, 204–205). This notion of “paintings of nature”

19 “In einem Zeitalter, wo man Früchte oft vor der Blüte erwartet und vieles darum zu verachten scheint, weil es nicht unmittelbar Wunden heilt, den Acker düngt, oder Mühlräder treibt, [...] vergisst man, dass Wissenschaften einen inneren Zweck haben und verliert das eigentlich literarische Interesse, das Streben nach Erkenntnis, als Erkenntnis, aus dem Auge. Die Mathematik kann nichts von ihrer Würde einbüßen, wenn sie als bloßes Objekt der Spekulation, als unanwendbar zur Auflösung praktischer Aufgaben betrachtet wird. Alles ist wichtig, was die Grenzen unseres Wissens erweitert und dem Geist neue Gegenstände der Wahrnehmung oder neue Verhältnisse zwischen dem Wahrgenommenen darbietet” (quoted by Osten, Humboldt 1999, 41).

20 “Den Reflex der Natur auf die Einbildungskraft und das Gefühl, als Anregungsmittel zum Naturstudium durch begeisterte Schilderung ferner Himmelsstriche und naturbeschreibende Poesie (ein Zweig der modernen Literatur), durch veredelte Landschaft-Malerei, durch Anbau und kontrastierende Gruppierung exotischer Pflanzenformen” (Humboldt 2004, 27).

expresses the synthesis of science and art, of concept and intuition (*Begriff und Anschauung*), that Humboldt theorized and practiced.

A close relationship can be established between reason and feeling, between the science of nature and the sentimental experience of nature. The connection between all living beings is felt by the heart as well as reflected on by reason. Humboldt shares a central notion with Romanticism: prescientific sympathy. The confused feelings, the sensitive intuition, and reason are all linked. Measuring nature does not cause disenchantment, complete rationalization, and the disappearance of the secret and sublime. On the contrary, discovering numeric relationships by scientific observation with a microscope or a telescope and establishing relationships between the past and the present allows us to appreciate the infinite number of these relationships, which are open to the history of nature that continues perpetually. We cannot know the next stage of nature's evolution, nor the endless possibilities of new relationships between all that exists. A more advanced knowledge of the laws of the world can only strengthen our enjoyment in nature and the feelings that it provokes in us (Köchy 2002, 10). Each new scientific discovery is only the beginning of a new labyrinth. Nature amazes and fascinates in its infinity and the openness of its future.²¹ We can measure and rationalize, but it is impossible to capture all the relationships in nature. Nature always keeps a secret, something mysterious that escapes our knowledge. But the more we increase our knowledge of nature, the more our enjoyment of nature increases.²²

The science of nature in Humboldt, which is both objective and subjective, both narrative and figurative, also includes an ethical aspect: poetry and paintings of nature can educate the soul about the value of nature in general. And this is particularly the case for the nature of Latin America. Humboldt wanted to show how this continent awakened his feelings of admiration and pleasure. Thus, he creates a new vision of the tropics through striking, euphoric, and lively poetic images, which transmit and provoke passion for Latin America. This also has political consequences in relation to his criticism of colonization.

Bernardin of Saint Peter describes a tropical storm with such precision and, at the same time, such poetry, that we understand how the sky suddenly becomes protective rather than threatening in an almost experiential sense. The unique value of his work, Humboldt observed, lies in the fact that he was able to describe what is particularly distinctive about tropical nature and only those who have experienced this sky might

21 "Das Gefühl des Erhabenen, in so fern es aus der einfachen Naturanschauung der Ausdehnung zu entspringen scheint, ist der feierlichen Stimmung des Gemüts verwandt, die dem Ausdruck des Unendlichen und Freien in den Sphären ideeller Subjektivität, in dem Bereich des Geistigen angehört" (Humboldt 2004, 18).

22 Humboldt wanted to show "wie der Naturgenuss, verschiedenartig in seinen inneren Quellen, durch klare Einsicht in den Zusammenhang der Erscheinungen und in die Harmonie der belebenden Kräfte erhöht werden könne" (Humboldt 2004, 27).

understand the truth of his description (Humboldt 2004, 221). Humboldt suggests that Camões also presented nature in a sublime fashion: in this case, Camões describes the ocean, stars, and storms experienced when crossing the Atlantic. However, Humboldt was disappointed by Camões' descriptions of the colors and smells of America because he in fact described what he had seen in European markets, since he had never actually been to America. It would be impossible for even as great a writer as Camões to talk about what he has not lived (Humboldt 2004, 216–218). Authenticity, an aesthetic value, acquires an ethical dimension; the apprehension of the cosmos is only accessible to a cosmopolitan mind; and a just vision of the world can be built only by seeing the world.

3 Cosmopolitanism

Beyond the natural studies, this journey also quickly became the starting point for an entire series of socio-political, economic, and cultural surveys centered on colonization and its atrocities—particularly with regard to slavery and the issue of indigenous people. These studies resulted mainly from Humboldt's personal experiences with both indigenous people and the conquistadors. But they were also founded on his meticulous research into colonial archives, his analyses of the press and his visits to factories, plantations, prisons, and hospitals. They constitute a unique testimony regarding this period, which remains unparalleled to this day. The horror of the wars of colonization is accompanied by a deeply depreciative image of the new continent—of its nature, indigenous people, and slaves—an image that Humboldt denounced and wished to transform. These wars implied not only the use of force, but also a cultural dimension, which appeared even in fields that one might expect to be more neutral, such as art and science. Peace requires more than merely the end of military, political, and economic domination—it also depends on a transformation of the depreciative view of the dominated.

The comprehension of the cosmos had cosmopolitanism as an ethical condition, which implied the recognition of nature and any human being. It implied respect not only of the universal human rights of natives and Black people, but also towards their particular forms of life. This cosmos supposes neither an atemporal natural order nor a humanity conceived a priori—it is born from the reciprocal relationships of causality, ever in transformation (Humboldt 2004), and was determined in the nineteenth century above all by the destructive actions of man: destruction of nature, the new continent, indigenous people, Black people, and, finally, since all are bound in the cosmos, destruction of oneself. Here I will analyze Humboldt's criticism of colonialism (3.1), his criticism of cultural domination (3.2), and his cosmopolitan view (3.3). This will demonstrate the relevance of Humboldt's project for the present day.

3.1 Criticism of Colonialism

Humboldt analyzes the essence and function of colonialism, the structure and organization of the colonial administration, its corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency, the role of the Church in the power mechanisms within the colonial system of exploitation, and, especially, the progress and imbalances in the economy, technology, engineering, agriculture, textile production, and trade. His goal is to show what must be changed concretely in the economic, political, and social structure of the colonial system in order to abolish slavery. It is, on the one hand, a transformation of the underlying structures of society and, on the other, a moral and legal issue, a change in attitude. The existence of the colonies, says Humboldt, is absolute immorality; it transforms both master and slave into barbarians, turning the conquistadors themselves into the opposite of civilized beings: prosperity and Enlightenment cannot spread in the colonies. European governments in Latin America promote disagreement, the separation of castes, hate and dispute; they forbid union through marriage; they permit treating the natives as inferior and exploiting them.²³

In his study on Mexico, Humboldt shows the relations of oppression from three perspectives: 1) the export system from Spain to Mexico of agricultural products and national and foreign industry; 2) the export from Mexico to Spain of precious metals; and 3) the religious and secular population, men's and women's schools, hospitals, and prisons. Humboldt's visits to factories show him that the situation of the free workers is only marginally better than that of the slaves.²⁴

23 "L'idée de la colonie meme est une idée immorale, c'est l'idée d'un pays qu'on rend tributaire à un autre, d'un pays dans lequel on ne doit parvenir qu'à un certain degré de prospérité, dans lequel l'industrie, les lumières ne doivent se répandre que jusqu'à un certain point [...]. Tout Gouvernement colonial est un gouvernement de méfiance [...]. On ne donne des emplois qu'aux parvenus et polissons que la faim exila de l'Europe, on permet à ceux-ci de mépriser publiquement les natifs de la Colonie, on envoie des personnes qui sucent le sang des créoles, et parlent sans cesse des biens qu'ils ont abandonnés pour s'établir dans une terre où tout leur déplaît, où le Ciel n'est pas bleu, où la viande n'a pas de goût, où tout est méprisabable quoiqu'ils ne le quittent pas [...]. Les gouvernements européens ont si bien réussi de répandre la haine et la désunion dans les Colonies qu'on n'y connaît presque pas les plaisirs de la société" (Guayaquil, Ecuador, January 4–February 17, 1803; Humboldt 1992, 63–64).

24 "Ce qui fait frémir et désirer que toute cette industrie n'existe pas, c'est l'horrible traitement qu'on inflige dans ces Manufactures aux malheureux Indiens et autres gens de couleur qui y travaillent. Las Fábricas paraissent des prisons [...]. Rien de plus sale, de plus puant, de plus obscur, de plus malsain que les ateliers [...]. Les hommes tout nus, maigres, défaits. On les tient enfermés toute la semaine, et on les sépare de leurs femmes. Le fouet joue sur leurs dos. On se demande comment cela pourrait être possible avec des gens libres. La Résolution du problème est qu'ils ne sont pas libres. Les maîtres de ces fabriques font ce qu'on fait à Quito dans los obrajes ou las haciendas dans toute l'Amérique, où il est difficile de trouver des bras ; ils avancent quelques gardes à des pauvres malheureux qui les dépensent aussitôt en buvant. Déjà le débiteur devient dépendant du

The aim of his empirical research is not only to denounce the immorality and injustice of the slave system from a normative point of view, but also to destroy the illusion that a nation can have long-term advantages at the cost of oppressing others.²⁵

This slave system was inseparable from the introduction of the State system in Latin America.²⁶ Modern political philosophy sets up the State as the universal principle of perfection of political organization and, alongside it, “primitive” only means incompetence and imperfection. The white man introduced into Latin American society the same hierarchical State political structure as in Europe, with one difference: this structure institutionalized racism, a conception of the inferiority of indigenous people, Black people, and those of mixed race; this legitimated and reinforced their lower social as well as political, economic, and cultural position. This State system also led to the wars by which a State sought to increase its territory, such as the United States’ war against Mexico (1846–1848), which Humboldt strongly criticized, stating: “The conquests of the republican Americans displease me extremely—I wish them all misfortune in tropical Mexico. I leave the north to them, where they will then spread their terrible slave system.”²⁷

Humboldt observed that the realization of the universal ideals of the French Revolution—liberty, equality, fraternity—could be much more developed in some indigenous tribes than in the majority of European cities. Several tribes lived in solid

maître, il est esclave, on les fait travailler pour payer sa dette [...]. Le malheureux travaille toute l’année et il ne sort jamais de sa dette, à peu près comme les Indiens des haciendas à qui leurs maîtres savent faire des calculs selon lesquels ils restent toujours redevables au maître bien qu’ils travaillent toute leur vie” (Quéretaro, Mexico, August 4–5, 1803; Humboldt 1992, 218–219).

- 25 “Le bien-être des blanc est intimement lié à celui de la race cuivrée, et qu’il ne peut y avoir de bonheur durable, dans les deux Amériques, qu’autant que cette race humiliée, mais non avilie par une longue oppression, participera à tous les avantages qui resultent des progrès de la civilisation et du perfectionnement de l’ordre social” (Humboldt 1825–1827, 4 :285–286).
- 26 In the same sense, in his study on the Island of Cuba, he states: “Historien de l’Amérique, j’ai voulu éclaircir les faits et préciser les idées, à l’aide de comparaisons et de tableaux statistiques. Cette investigation presque minutieuse des faits semble nécessaire au moment où, d’un côté, l’enthousiasme conduisant à une bienveillante crédulité, de l’autre, des passions haineuses qui importunent la sécurité des nouvelles républiques, ont donné lieu aux aperçus les plus vagues et les plus erronés [...]. J’ai examiné seulement ce qui regarde l’organisation des sociétés humaines ; l’inégale répartition des droits et des jouissances de la vie ; les dangers menaçants que la sagesse du législateur et la modération des hommes libres peuvent éloigner, quelles que soient les formes de gouvernement. Il appartient au voyageur qui a vu de près ce qui tourmente ou dégrade la nature humaine, de faire parvenir les plaintes de l’infortune à ceux qui peuvent la soulager [...] L’esclavage est sans doute le plus grand de tous les maux qui ont affligé l’humanité [...] Tout ce qui est injuste porte un germe de destruction” (Humboldt 1970, 3:445–448).
- 27 “Die Eroberungen der republikanischen Amerikaner missfallen mir höchlichst. Ich wünsche ihnen alles Unglück in dem tropischen Mexiko. Je leur abandonne le Nord, wo sie dann ihr verruchtes Sklavenwesen verbreiten werden” (Letter to Christian Carl Josias Bunsen, Sanssouci, July 28, 1847; Humboldt 2006, 102).

relationships of harmony and peace between themselves, with their members enjoying equality and freedom—aspects that were prized in modern Europe without actually being experienced in reality.²⁸

3.2 Criticism of Cultural Domination

Testifying to the value of other ways of life was, for Humboldt, as important as denouncing their suffering: “The history of the lowest classes of a people is nothing less than the history of events that cause great inequality in income, pleasure and individual happiness, and thus, little by little, put most of the nation under supervision and dependence. But we seek this in vain in annals of history, which retain well the memory of great political revolutions, wars, conquests and other evils achieved by humanity; but let us know very little about the destiny of the poorest and also largest classes of the society” (Humboldt 1825, 384–385).²⁹ Contrary to a philosophy that looks to the broad outline of history for signs of the realization of reason, its positive side and its progress, Humboldt’s testimonies tell history from the point of view of those who had been overcome and those who died.

The atrocities of colonization, beyond its material oppressions, imply several forms of cultural domination, which mark the depreciative view of the colonized through to the present. In the innumerable observations Humboldt made regarding these forms of cultural domination, we can distinguish four. The first is the domination of language. The fundamental principle of the cultural standardization of the State—a single language for all—also guides the colonizing project. As words carry spiritual and natural views of world, the adoption of Spanish in the colonization of Latin America also implies the adoption of its concepts. The missionaries, as Humboldt observes, endeavored to teach the indigenous people two words that were very close

28 “Il n’y a qu’une très petite partie de l’Europe dans laquelle le cultivateur jouisse librement du fruit de ses travaux [...]. Presque tout le nord de l’Europe nous confirme cette triste expérience: il offre des pays dans lesquels, malgré la civilisation vantée des hautes classes de la société, le cultivateur vit encore presque dans le même avilissement sous lequel il gémissait trois ou quatre siècles plus tôt. Nous trouverions peut-être le sort des Indiens plus heureux, si nous le comparions à celui des paysans de la Courlande, de la Russie et d’une grande partie de l’Allemagne septentrionale” (Humboldt 1825, 385).

29 “L’histoire des dernières classes d’un peuple est la relation des événements funestes qui, en fondant à-la-fois une grande inégalité de fortune, de jouissance et de bonheur individuel, ont placé peu-à-peu une partie de la nation sous la tutelle et dans la dépendance de l’autre. Cette relation, nous la cherchons presque en vain dans les annales de l’histoire; elles conservent la mémoire des grandes révolutions politiques, des guerres, des conquêtes et d’autres fléaux qui ont accablé l’humanité; elles nous apprennent peu sur le sort plus ou moins déplorabile de la classe la plus pauvre et la plus nombreuse de la société”.

to one another in Spanish, with the difference of a single consonant: *infierno* (hell) and *invierno* (winter). However, the indigenous people, for whom neither of these words made sense, used “winter” and “hell” interchangeably.³⁰

Humboldt opposes the dominant thinking of his time that the natives had an impoverished language that corresponded to their impoverished abilities for reflection and abstraction. To his brother Wilhelm, he writes: “I occupy myself very much with the study of the languages of the American natives and I realize the falseness of what Condamine said about their poverty. The language of Caribenhos, for example, is rich, beautiful, energetic and polished. It does not miss expressions for abstract ideas: one can speak about future, eternity, existence etc.” (Letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt, November 25, 1802; Humboldt 1880, 93).³¹ Against the notion of the superiority of European languages (and reciprocally of thought) vis-à-vis the savage languages, Humboldt affirms: “There is almost no work of modern literature that cannot be translated into Peruvian” (Humboldt 1970 I, 490).³²

Imposing forms of knowledge is a second type of domination observed by Humboldt. European science was based on rational principles that lacked the very deep, empirical knowledge of nature possessed by indigenous people. This range of knowledge was considered as inferior by the white man, to whom it was inaccessible. Humboldt, however, regarded exactly this kind of indigenous knowledge as essential for his own research. Humboldt observes that a native need merely taste a leaf to immediately know to which tree it belonged, while he himself could taste the leaves of fifteen different trees and they would all have the same taste of nothing for him. With these leaves, roots, and grass, the natives also knew how to treat diseases; they could distinguish the water from different rivers by its smell (see Letter to Citizen Delambre and D. Guevara Vanconcellon, November 24, 1800, December 23, 1800; Humboldt 1904, 92 and 105): “A person who lives in the forests is the most reliable and exact observer of nature. He knows the branches of the trees of these forests; he

30 “Les malheurs de l’Indien des Missions consistent en ce qu’il est l’esclave du Père, du Governador, ‘Alguasil, Capitan [...] qu’il n’a pas de volonté à lui, qu’on le sépare six mois de l’année de sa famille pour le faire ramer dans la Canoa du Père, qu’il n’a pas de propriété parce que le Missionnaire le force à lui céder tout dont il a besoin, qu’on le fouette à chaque instant dans l’église même, qu’il voit fouetter patiemment au Reso sa femme, sa mère, sans différence d’âge (parce qu’elle prononce *infierno* au lieu d’*invierno*)” (Lima, Peru, October 23–December 24, 1802; Humboldt 1992, 141).

31 “Das Studium der amerikanischen Sprachen hat mich ebenfalls sehr beschäftigt, und ich habe gefunden, wie falsch La Condamines Urteil über ihre Armut ist. Die karibische Sprache z. B. verbindet Reichtum, Anmut, Kraft und Zartheit. Es fehlt ihr nicht an Ausdrücken für abstrakte Begriffe: sie kann von Zukunft, Ewigkeit, Existenz usw. reden” (Letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt, November 25, 1802; Humboldt 1880, 93).

32 “Il n’y a presque pas d’ouvrage de la littérature moderne qu’on ne puisse traduire en péruvien” (Humboldt 1970 I, 490).

knows each one of their chimpanzees” (Guayaquil, Ecuador, January 4–February 17, 1803; Humboldt 1992, 181).³³

Aesthetic taste was a third form of domination. European taste, as Humboldt observes, had the Greek standard as its paradigm, which prevented the appreciation of other works of art. He certainly recognizes the undeniable magnitude of Greek art, but it is a historical model that cannot be taken as an absolute criterion of what is beautiful, thereby reducing the art of indigenous people to the category of craft-work. Humboldt undertakes a long study of this art, showing the aesthetic value of indigenous art in his book on the Cordilleras³⁴.

A fourth form of domination was the contempt towards indigenous values. Humboldt saw himself involved in the dilemmas that he denounced, when the natives showed him the cemetery of a tribe exterminated by the conquistadors. As soon as Humboldt expressed his interest in studying the skeletons, the natives reacted with fear and outrage, as tradition dictated that he who takes and transports human skeletons is punished by death. Not taking this superstition seriously, Humboldt and Bonpland moved away from the group one evening to retrieve skeletons. A Jesuit friend of Humboldt’s then brought the skeletons back to Europe. However, the prophecy came true: the ship wrecked along the journey, the Jesuit died, and the skeletons were never found (Ette 2002, 183–196). As Otmar Ette notes, this story haunted Humboldt, who ceaselessly wondered about the extent to which he could violate what the indigenous people regarded as the dignity of the dead—which was no different from what Europeans considered: as Ette argues, they would also become indignant if an indigenous researcher wished to take skeletons from a European cemetery for his own private study (Ette 2002, 183–196).

The tragic lives of the slaves and indigenous people and the feeling of impotence vis-à-vis this destiny and merciless punishment at the slightest transgression gave rise to several mythologies. The politico-economic analyses, which reveal the structure of exploitation, are thus accompanied by an analysis of the interior and subjective world generated by this context and its corresponding worldview.

33 “L’homme sauvage est l’Observateur de la Nature le plus fidèle, le plus exact. Il connaît les branches des arbres de ses forêts, les Singes tête par tête [...]. A nos herborisations nous avons consulté des Indiens sur le nom des arbres. On trouve des troncs si élevés qu’on n’en distingue pas le feuillage. L’Indien prend l’écorce en bouche, la mâche et dit avec la plus grande assurance quel est l’arbre. Je goûtai la même écorce et sur 15 arbres je ne trouvai aucune différence de goût. Ils me paraissaient tous également insipides” (Guayaquil, Ecuador, January 4–February 17, 1803; Humboldt 1992, 181).

34 Regarding artistic street in Peru, Humboldt writes: “Was ich von römischen Kunststrassen in Italien, dem südlichen Frankreich und Spanien gesehen, war nicht imposantes als diese Werke der alten Peruaner” (Humboldt 1969, 121; see also Humboldt 1810).

The indigenous people created the myth that their destroyed empire would one day be restored. The son of a chief—a 17-year-old youth who accompanied Humboldt among the ruins of an Incan community destroyed in the sixteenth century by the conquistadors in search of its riches—told Humboldt the details, embellished with his imagination, of the golden treasures hidden under the grounds they had traversed: underground Incan gardens, in which nature was imitated by gold sculptures of trees with leaves, fruit, and birds. One would not be able to reach this place, however, until the re-establishment of the Incan empire. In fact, the imagination of this young man was based on the reports of golden gardens made by several historians of the Conquest. Humboldt observes that “the morbid confidence with which the young Astorpilco spoke [...] made a deep but gloomy impression on me. Aerial images and deception are here again consolation for great privation and earthly suffering” (Humboldt 1969, 139).³⁵ When Humboldt asks the young man why he does not go out in search of these treasures, he hears an answer that, for him, was the expression of typical quiet resignation: “Such a desire (*tal antojo*) does not come to us; the father says it is sinful (*que fuese pecado*). If we had the golden branches with all their golden fruits, the white neighbors would hate and harm us. We own a small field and good wheat (*buen trigo*).”³⁶

Humboldt found the expression “savage,” which was used for native, to be unpleasant and inappropriate.³⁷ Humboldt considers that it is the white man who made the native Indian wild and savage, who prevented him from developing, from establishing contact and friendships with other peoples, even with the Europeans: “The barbarism which reigns in these different regions is perhaps less due to a primitive absence of all civilization than to the effects of a long debasement. Those who are indicated by the name ‘savages’ are probably descendants of highly advanced nations; and how to distinguish prolonged childhood from the human species (if it exists somewhere) from a state of moral degradation, in which isolation, misery, forced migrations, or the rigors of the climate, erase the traces of civilization?” (Humboldt 1970 I, 458).³⁸

35 “Die krankhafte Zuversicht, mit welcher der junge Astorpilco aussprach [...] machte einen tiefen, aber trüben Eindruck auf mich. Luftbilder und Täuschung sind hier wiederum Trost für große Entbehrung und irdische Leiden” (Humboldt 1969, 139).

36 “Solch ein Gelüste (*tal antojo*) kommt uns nicht; der Vater sagt, dass es sündlich wäre (*que fuese pecado*). Hätten wir die goldenen Zweige samt allen ihren goldenen Früchten, würden die weiße Nachbarn uns hassen und schaden. Wir besitzen ein kleines Feld und guten Weizen (*buen trigo*)” (Humboldt 1969, 139).

37 “J’emploie à regret le mot sauvage, parce qu’il indique entre l’Indien réduit, vivant dans les misères, et l’Indien libre et indépendant, une différence de culture qui est souvent démentie par l’observation. C’est une erreur assez répandue en Europe que de regarder tous les indigènes non réduits comme errants et chasseurs” (Humboldt 1970 I, 460).

38 “La plupart des hordes que nous désignent sous le nom de sauvages descendent probablement de nations jadis plus avancées dans la culture ?” (Humboldt 1970 I, 458).

Indigenous people who lived in freedom, observes Humboldt, showed a passion for learning Spanish as well as an impressive capacity for learning, while those who lived in the missions and were obliged to learn the language did not seem to make any progress. Recounting how the indigenous people helped him to understand nature and everything else he learned from them, Humboldt notes: “The Indians are the only Geographers of India [...]. I had great facilities to make with them the Orinoco map. They are not mysterious where they do not know the tyranny of the white man. Distrust and secrets are unknown by the Casiquiare and by the Tuamini. But unfortunately, how difficult it is to know the names and the location of the places in countries where the Indians, through trafficking by the Spaniards, were either exterminated or confused (dazed)” (Bogotá, Colombia, July 7–September 8, 1801; Humboldt 1992, 128).³⁹

3.3 Humanity

Through these major studies on the cultures of different native civilizations—such as the Maya, Aztec, Zapotec, Mixtec, Inca, Muisca, Chibcha, and Peruvian—Humboldt wanted to change the image of Latin America, which was considered in Europe to be culturally inferior (Osten 1999, 36). Bolívar calls Humboldt “the true discoverer of the new world,” and goes on to state that his work “brought more good than all the Conquistadors put together” (quoted by Osten 1999, 21). Cosmopolitanism could not be reduced to something founded on common values, universal principles of justice, and universal rights (equality and freedom); the understanding of “humanity” could not be exhausted in its abstract concept. In order to grasp “humanity,” it would be necessary to know about different ways of life and, in order to be cosmopolitan, it would be necessary to recognize the value that other ways of life have and, especially, what one could learn for one’s own life. Humboldt’s attitude towards the natives is not a relation of tolerance, nor is it simply a relation of respect or a recognition of their rights. Humboldt was delighted to live among the natives; living with them provoked a rediscovery and at the same time a transformation of himself, as he writes: “What pleasure it is living in these forests with the natives, where one comes across different several independent indigenous peoples, and in their areas are the traces of

39 “Les indiens sont les seules Géographes des Indes [...]. Ils ne sont guère mistérieux où ils ne connaissent pas la tyrannie des blancs. La méfiance et le mystère est inconnu dans le Casiquiare et Tuamini. Mais helàs, quelle difficulté de se formes des idées sur le nom et la position des lieux dans des pays où les Indiens sont ou exterminés ou confondus (abrutis) par le Commerce avec les espagnols” (Bogotá, Colombia, July 7–September 8, 1801; Humboldt 1992, 128).

the Peruvian culture. Here, one sees nations that indeed cultivate well the earth, that are hospitable, that appear gentle and human.”⁴⁰

Humboldt’s thought was quite different from that which dominated Prussia at the time. As Ette (2002, 40) remarks, for Hegel, everything in America appears sick and weak: the animals show the same inferiority as the human beings; lions, tigers, crocodiles might have similarities with those same animals in the old continent, but they were smaller, weaker, thinner (Hegel 2005). Humboldt’s impressions, however, were quite different. In a letter to Varnhagen (July 1, 1837), he writes: “For me, of course, there is a forest of ideas in that Hegel [...], but for a person who, like me, is banished like an insect to the ground and its natural diversity, an abstract assertion of purely false facts and views about America and the Indian world becomes liberty-robbing and frightening. [...] I would like to renounce ‘to the European beef’, which Hegel p. 77 fables so much better than the American one, and live next to the weak, feeble (unfortunately 25 foot long) crocodiles.”⁴¹ His most famous sentence—“the most dangerous worldview is the worldview of those who have never viewed the world”—is therefore the one that best expresses his thought and his critical approach to the philosophy of his time.

Humboldt thus questions the myths of his time related to progress in science and customs. The first is the myth of moral progress, since morality was often used to justify colonization: those who had developed moral arguments seemed to be the first to say, by invoking these moral reasons, that colonization was an effort to build a better world. Contrary to the philosophy of progress of his time, Humboldt did not believe that cultural progress *per se* can make humanity advance; rather, the progress of culture often seems to coincide with regressions to barbarism.

Furthermore, for Humboldt, progress in science did not represent an absolute improvement in the living conditions of humanity. Science, which was supposed to bring progress to the whole world, did not reach Latin America. All the knowledge and technology that seemed to make life more comfortable for the white man was

40 “Quelle jouissance que de vivre dans ces forêts indiennes, où l’on rencontre tant de peuplades indiennes indépendantes, chez lesquelles on trouve un reste de culture péruvienne ! On y voit des nations qui cultivent bien la terre, qui sont hospitalières, qui paraissent douces et humaines [...]. Ma santé et ma gaieté ont visiblement augmenté depuis que j’ai quitté l’Espagne [...]. Je suis née pour les Tropiques, jamais je n’ai été si constamment bien portant que depuis deux ans” (Havana, Letter to Karl Ludwig Willdenow, February 21, 1801. Humboldt 1904, 112).


41 “Ein Wald von Ideen ist freilich für mich in jenem Hegel, dem Gans so meisterhaft den Charakter seiner großen Individualität gelassen hat, aber für einen Menschen, der, wie ich, insektenartig an den Boden und seine Naturverschiedenheit gebannt ist, wird ein abstraktes Behaupten rein falscher Tatsachen und Ansichten über Amerika und die indische Welt freiheitraubend und beängstigend. [...] Ich thäte gerne ‘Verzicht auf das europäische Rindfleisch’, das Hegel S. 77 so viel besser als das amerikanische fabelt, und lebte neben den schwachen kraftlosen (leider 25 Fuß langen) Krokodilen” (Humboldt 1860, 44).

unknown. The white man did not bring this progress with him. Indigenous people and slaves did not profit from any of it. The State did not guarantee their safety, equality, and freedom, but merely secured the privileges of the few.

The issues that Humboldt confronted are currently at the center of the contemporary debate on what is generally called “multiculturalism,” based mainly on the philosophy of Kant and Hegel. However, the name “Alexander von Humboldt” is completely missing from this debate. Nonetheless, it is Humboldt who directed German thought towards the rest of the world (Ette 2002, 36). This contemporary debate is translated into the classic articulation between the universal and the particular. For the authors who currently reconstruct the universal principles of modernity, the history of European thought seems to have turned only to Europe itself. Scholars reconstruct the modern European conception of the production of knowledge, art, morality, and justice, without mentioning the only great German thinker who went beyond European borders. One might expect the philosophers who celebrate “the other” and “difference” to remember the man who lived among the natives for five years, yet they do not mention him, just as the postcolonial literature seems to have forgotten him. Even if Humboldt knew only colonial Latin America, and postcolonial problems have a very different specificity and exclusion mechanisms of their own, the problems that he saw molded the world in a decisive and irreversible way right up to this day (Ette 2002, 19).

Humboldt was cosmopolitan: in each form of nature and culture that he came across, he sought that which was unique and fascinating. For him, the most talented scientists and artists were those who could draw on the singular beauty of what is far beyond their borders. This is the reason why Goethe, who regarded Humboldt as the only soul with which he had an elective affinity, has his character Otilie write in her private diary that:⁴² “Only that natural scientist is worthy of admiration, who knows how to describe and portray the strangest, weirdest things, with their locality, with all proximity, each time in their own element. How I would like to hear Humboldt tell us a story just once again.” This is the essence of Humboldt’s cosmopolitanism and this is the legacy he has handed down to us today.

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42 “Nur der Naturforscher ist verehrungswert, der uns das Fremdeste, Seltsamste, mit seiner Lokalität, mit aller Nachbarschaft, jedes Mal in dem eigensten Elemente zu schildern und darzustellen weiß. Wie gern möchte ich nur einmal Humboldten erzählen hören” (Goethe 2009, 222).

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