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INTRODUCTION

Revisiting Alexander von Humboldt

AS A GLOBETROTTING NATURALIST, multifaceted scientist, and international celebrity, Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) left a deep mark on his contemporaries and succeeding generations. They admired his passion for traveling extensively in Europe as well as to the Americas and Central Asia, crawling down mine shafts, climbing up volcanic mountains, and tirelessly investigating everything he encountered. The breadth of his interests, ranging from botany and geology to history and languages, has impressed people worldwide for two centuries. Humboldt's ideal of viewing nature as a 'whole,' interconnected with human society, has never lost its appeal, and it has drawn renewed attention in our time. For these and other reasons, which will surface in the succeeding chapters, Humboldt exerts an enduring fascination to this day.

This book provides a concise biography of Alexander von Humboldt and offers a compact guide to understanding

his sprawling oeuvre. It introduces readers to the different stages of Humboldt's life and their historical circumstances, while illuminating the origins and trajectories of his scientific interests. The astonishing stream of publications that poured from his pen and their intentions deserve explaining, too, especially since Humboldt cultivated scholarly writing as a way of life.

Such a succinct overview already reveals some peculiarities of Humboldt's persona and thinking that may at first seem paradoxical. Many contemporaries regarded Humboldt as the most distinguished scholar of his time. But he never acquired an academic degree, taught at a university, or left us with a single game-changing discovery. The 'gentleman scientist' Humboldt made his most spectacular journeys under the protection of authoritarian regimes. Still, he fiercely protected his independence and became a critic of slavery and despotism. His approach to nature and society bore a Prussian and European imprint. Yet Humboldt repudiated nationalism and was influenced by non-European sources. He sent and received tens of thousands of letters and sought publicity like few scientists before him. Nonetheless, the ubiquitous savant closely guarded his privacy.

This biography expands on all these aspects while subjecting Humboldt to today's questions, inquiring into his scientific practices, social contexts, and networks of knowledge. It refrains from taking Humboldt out of his epoch and portraying him as a singular intellect way ahead of his time. Such heroizing tendencies have gained momentum in recent years, often catapulting Humboldt

straight into the postmodern age. By contrast, my narrative does not ascribe achievements to this Prussian nobleman that cannot be substantiated or that he explicitly distanced himself from. Humboldt was not a revolutionary and pre-Darwinian advocate of evolutionary theory, nor did he ‘invent nature.’ The pendulum occasionally swings to the other extreme and reduces Humboldt to someone who saw non-European worlds primarily with ‘imperial eyes.’ Viewing him through a refined biographical lens avoids both mystification and vilification.¹ I want to suggest a more nuanced interpretation, portraying a multifaceted Humboldt whose thinking defies simple formulas.

First, Alexander von Humboldt did not fall out of the sky or emerge from a void. In every regard, he was a child of his times; the historical context matters. Humboldt’s thinking was intertwined with practical and economic considerations, which audiences fascinated by his grand ideas have tended to underestimate. He also had to contend with political expectations. While extravagantly talented and attracting many admirers, he had many influential predecessors and collaborators. His abilities needed a conducive environment and support from others to come to fruition. Humboldt operated within a wide range of social relations. Exchange with his brother Wilhelm was a constant in his biography. From this vantage point, Humboldt becomes even more interesting historically. This also means taking seriously his Prussian and European experiences before sailing to America in 1799 and not reducing them to a prelude to his famous journey.

Second, Humboldt certainly emerges from the following chapters as an impressive polymath who embraced science and continuous research as his calling. Yet he was a complex personality. This biography focuses in a novel way on Humboldt as a human being, a *mensch*. That, too, matters for how we interpret his research and writing. More than just an intellectual, Humboldt was a sensitive and emotional man with a strong sensual streak, keenly aware of his own desires and frustrations. These human and emotional features directly influenced how he assembled and analyzed knowledge. Humboldt's science differed from the ideal type encapsulated in 'Humboldtian Science,' a term often used by historians of science.² His was a very personal practice of knowledge production, developing over time. For quite a while, Humboldt's science was rather experiential, marked by insecurities and subjective impulses that made him deviate from an ideal of objectivity.

Finally, Alexander von Humboldt was a figure representing an epoch—glorification and criticism, old and new, aside. His biography brings into focus some of the far-reaching transformations that unfolded over the course of his long life span of almost ninety years. Born in 1769, the same year as Napoleon, Humboldt lived from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to the threshold of modern imperialism. He saw revolutions come and go in Europe and the Americas. Humboldt witnessed firsthand the ongoing enslavement of people but also the beginning of the end of slavery. He observed the collapse of the Spanish colonial empire, Napoleon's rise and fall, and the

dawn of an industrial, technological age. A society that traveled by foot and on horseback, in coaches and on sailing ships, became in his lifetime one of railroads and steamships, both of which he came to use. By the end, Humboldt was as familiar with the revolutionary technology of telegraphic communication as he was with photography.

Humboldt recognized that trade, information, and human actions were becoming ever more closely interconnected across borders. At the same time, he experienced the emergence of nation-states and political ideologies that imposed new borderlines, both inside and out. These new divisions confirmed him in his determination to build bridges between cultures even though he insisted on maintaining his independence. The effect, ironic as it may appear, was that Humboldt became a privileged insider in the many spaces he traversed while remaining an outsider. Humboldt set out to compare nature and cultures globally. For that reason, too, he had to wrestle with a dynamic that he himself exemplified. Information had accumulated so rapidly, and become so specialized, that it was impossible to take in the many bits and pieces in a single glance. An increasingly self-assertive civil society demanded that knowledge be made accessible for all social strata and consumed in new formats. Humboldt's later years thus saw the emergence of a novel popular science.

Humboldt embraced all these challenges. At times, he was daunted by the sheer scale and breadth of what he had set out to accomplish. In this respect, too, Alexander von Humboldt belongs squarely in an era that lived through a

“transformation of the world.”³ Like every individual from a bygone age, he retains an essential intransigence, notwithstanding his present-day appeal. I have tried to capture something of the flavor of his voice by quoting extensively from his letters, diaries, and publications. The chapter titles use the words of Humboldt himself, mentioned in the text.

This expanded English-language edition differs in several regards from the original one in German. A few details have been left out, and the introduction has been rewritten. Some sentences and passages have been added to clarify certain aspects. Two new maps and additional illustrations serve that purpose, too, and demonstrate the importance of Humboldt’s travels within Europe. This edition also contains endnotes, primarily concerned with documenting direct quotes. With few exceptions, these are translated directly by me from the German or French to stay as close to the original meaning as possible. The endnotes therefore reference first the original sources; for ease of access, they are followed by available English-language translations, even if they differ slightly in wording. The selected bibliography at the end concentrates on publications in English. The new “Guide to Sources and Further Reading” gives readers some orientation in the ocean of materials anyone interested in Alexander von Humboldt will need to navigate.

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