

Alexander von Humboldt and North America

Conference by the German Historical Institute Washington, D.C.
and the University at Buffalo (SUNY)
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Participants: Nancy Anderson (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (SUNY, Buffalo), Gerald L. Carr (Newark, Delaware), Charles Closmann (GHI), John Cloud (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), Ann Cox Halkett (Humboldt Field Research Institute), Andreas Daum (SUNY, Buffalo), Georgina H. Endfield (University of Nottingham, UK), Ottmar Ette (University of Potsdam), Hartmut Keil (University of Leipzig), Andreas Kunz (Institut für Europäische Geschichte), Simone Lässig (GHI), Andrea and Ingrid Lotze (Humboldt Field Research Institute), Kent Mathewson (Louisiana State University), Leslie K. Overstreet (Smithsonian Institution Libraries), Aaron Sachs (Yale University), Dirk Schumann (GHI), Georg Schütte (Alexander von Humboldt Foundation), Ingo Schwarz (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences), Wendy St. Jean (Boston University), Laura Dassow Walls (Lafayette College), Suzanne Zeller (Wilfrid Laurier University)

In the summer of 2004, historians and the general public had good reason to commemorate the bicentennial of two seminal explorations that have left an imprint on the history of both North and South America: the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific and Alexander von Humboldt's much longer voyage to South, Central, and North America, which he concluded in 1804. While the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition turned into a major media event in the United States, supported by popular books and television series, the American journey of Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was primarily celebrated in South America, where the German-born, yet cosmopolitan traveler and scholar spent most of his time. Shortly before returning to Europe, however, Humboldt also visited the young United States, and spent three weeks on the east coast. He was honored at the American Philosophical Society, the United States' oldest learned Society in Philadelphia, and met President Thomas Jefferson in Washington. Jefferson had a keen interest in Humboldt's knowledge of New Spain and Humboldt's assessment of the geography and condition of those territories in the West, on which the United States had already cast an eye.

Exactly two hundred years after Humboldt dined with Jefferson in the presidential home on Pennsylvania Avenue, scholars from diverse disciplines convened in Washington to launch a new departure for Humboldt research and begin a systematic evaluation of Alexander von Humboldt's meaning for North America. This conference explored Humboldt's role as a scientific, cultural, and political personality in North America, and addressed the various cultural, intellectual, social, and political influences of Humboldt's oeuvre in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The conference thus sought to rediscover the immensely rich tradition of

Humboldtian thinking in North America. Not only did Thomas Jefferson and Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasury in the young republic, forge links with Humboldt. Throughout the nineteenth century, long after Humboldt's death in 1859, and well into the twentieth century, Humboldtian science and ideas continued to stimulate scientific writers, literary authors, environmental thinkers, politicians, leaders of ethnic minorities, and many others. All these have engaged in a complicated process of rereading and redefining Humboldt, capitalizing on what remains the most wide-ranging trans-disciplinary scientific oeuvre in world history. The ramifications of this process reached into the work of the United States Coastal Service, New England's Transcendentalism and North American landscape painting no less than into the preservationist movement of John Muir's time.

This evaluation of Alexander von Humboldt's significance for the United States is part of a recent and increasing international interest in Humboldt that reaches across scientific disciplines. Humboldt's main idea, as expressed in his magnum opus *Kosmos* (available to American readers in English translation in the second half of the nineteenth century as *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, with the first two volumes recently reprinted in the United States), may be summarized as the concept of the "interconnectedness" of all phenomena, natural and human. Certainly, Humboldt wanted to "collect, dissect, and measure" these phenomena, as he wrote shortly before embarking on his American journey. But he equally aimed to integrate the partial, specialized knowledge deriving from such measurements into larger views of society, of heaven and earth. Humboldt was aware that all knowledge was rhetorically constructed and always a literary and artistic enterprise. Humboldt's new popularity today – certainly among scholars, but not confined to them – might result from a common wish to overcome the dichotomy of what Charles Percy Snow once called the "two cultures." Reading Humboldt today coincides with attempts to understand the globalization of knowledge at the beginning of the twentieth century in a way that goes beyond the mere accumulation of overly specialized expertise.

The conference was opened with a welcome by Dirk Schumann, deputy director of the GHI, and Georg Schütte, general secretary of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. In his keynote speech entitled "Toward World Science? Humboldtian Science, World Concepts, and Transregional Studies," Ottmar Ette – a scholar of Romance Literature with broad interests in the history of philosophy, literary studies and Humboldt's oeuvre – suggested a new framework for understanding Humboldtian ideas. He uncovered the different semantic structures underlying Humboldt's definition of "cosmos." Ette concluded that Humboldtian knowledge was meant as "Lebens-" and "Überlebenswissen": knowledge that provides orientation to live and to survive, and that connects analysis and personal experience. Ette emphasized that the trajectories of Humboldt's work were transdisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. Humboldt aimed to establish networks of knowledge across regions and to use different media – writings, visual imagery, and other presentations – in order to communicate this knowledge to the public at large.

During Ottmar Ette's lecture, the audience had an immediate visual experience of Humboldt's concept of knowledge. Leslie Overstreet had kindly arranged several original books by Humboldt from the Smithsonian Institution's rare book collection on display next to the speaker's podium. Following the lecture, the audience used the unique opportunity to have a closer look at works such as *Cosmos* and *Vues des Cordillères et monumens des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique*. The presentations were followed by a reception in the GHI's Felix Gilbert Reading Room.

Sessions began the following day with a thematic introduction to the conference by Andreas Daum. Daum placed Humboldt in the context of recent research trends in the fields of history of science, space, and visuality. He also addressed the challenge of writing a biography of Humboldt in light of Humboldt's extensive oeuvre and the divergent interpretations of his work and personality.

The first session dealt with “Popular Culture, Politics, and Networks.” *Ingo Schwarz* dealt with Humboldt’s correspondence as an example of international scientific communication in the nineteenth century. Based on his extensive knowledge of Humboldt’s letters documented in the Humboldt Research Center in Berlin, Schwarz used Humboldt’s communication with Thomas Jefferson, Samuel George Morton, Lorin Blodget, and Matthew Fontaine Maury to illustrate how scientific interests and personal, material, and political motivations merged in this trans-continental exchange. The latter did not simply follow one pattern but also showed inconsistencies and gaps. *Hartmut Keil* focused on the 1850s and 1860s, and placed Humboldt in the context of the restructuring of the American party system during this period. He demonstrated that Humboldt’s name and the scholar’s critical views of slavery became political arguments; they were used by the new Republican party, particularly by John Frémont, and must be seen in the light of the realignment of the Irish and, to a large extent, the German minorities with the Republicans’ political platform. Choosing the German emigrant Francis Lieber as an example, Keil further emphasized that the ideal of European enlightenment, encapsulated by Humboldt, strongly appealed to liberals in the United States and helped to establish a transatlantic intellectual network. *Andreas Daum* extended the perspective into the realm of popular culture from the 1850s to the end of the century. He explored how Humboldt and his reputation were culturally appropriated by diverse groups – primarily in immigrant and democratic milieus, but throughout the United States – in order to create notions of social and cultural identity in a time of ethnic and social diversification as well as demographic and urban growth. The commemoration of Humboldt in places like Philadelphia and St. Louis became the core of a public culture of festivals, monuments, and anniversaries, in which historicism met political wishes for social and ideological cohesion.

The second session addressed the role of Humboldtian ideas in mapping the North American continent and “Inventing a Geography” for it. *Kent Mathewson* traced the impact of Humboldtian thinking on North American geography from Jedidia Morse, whose ideas on electromagnetism were of particular interest for Humboldt, to Frémont’s work for the Corps of Topographical Engineers, to John Wesley Powell. Some German explorers and travelers such as Duke Paul Wilhelm, Balduin Möllhausen, and Prince Maximilian von Wied may be regarded as Humboldt’s foremost “children” (William Goetzman) in the United States. Humboldt’s reputation among North American geographers began to decline during the last third of the century, although Mathewson traced his influence well into the late twentieth century. This observation stimulated discussion throughout the conference about why specific scientific ideas gain or lose popularity, and how such cycles may be explained as a dialectical process between knowledge producers and the needs of society at a given time. *Wendy St. Jean* focused on the use of Humboldt in the process of the United States’ westward expansion, which coincided with Humboldt’s critique of slavery and racial inequalities, a topic that the conference picked up on several occasions. This topic also led to animated discussions about how to define “racism” and whether Humboldt may be accused of having looked at the societies he observed with “imperial eyes” (Mary Louise Pratt). St. Jean concentrated on Jefferson’s interest in Humboldt’s information on what would later become the American Southwest. Humboldt had not visited this area, but knew about it from Mexican archives, and sketched it on his map of New Spain that he gave to Gallatin in 1804. St. Jean argued that Humboldt’s map, in spite of his balanced view of Mexico, became an effective rhetorical tool for the United States government to use in its assertion that no Spaniards occupied the territory, which led to even larger territorial claims and the settlement of the Southwest.

The exploration of the North American Continent was at the center of the third session. *Suzanne Zeller* dealt with “Humboldt and the Habitability of Canada’s Great Northwest.” Her paper presented a subtle analysis of the legacy of Humboldt for British North Americans during the first half of the nineteenth century. It problematized the definition of what historians have called “Humboldtian science.” Zeller first took the naturalist John Richardson as an example. Like Humboldt, Richardson valued wide-ranging standardized documentations of localized scientific data, but he refined Humboldt’s concept of isolines. The further analysis of naturalists such as Edward Sabine and John Henry Lefroy and their mapping of the meteorology,

magnetism, and geography of what would become Canada demonstrated that these men's ideas did not descend directly from a cosmic, European concept. Instead, it was the bio-geographical practice that made use of some of Humboldt's ideas, yet generated original insights deviating from what was never accepted as an authoritative Humboldtian model. The complications and transformations of Humboldtian thinking were stressed by *Aaron Sachs*, too, in his paper on "Humboldt, Exploration, and Environmental Thought in Nineteenth-Century America." Taking the explorer John Reynolds, the photographer Timothy O'Sullivan, the director of the United States Geological Survey Clarence King, and the pioneer American environmentalism John Muir as examples, Sachs delineated the context of Victorian culture in which these men cited Humboldt in their distinct attempts to find a comprehensive view of nature that balanced specific scientific insights and the wish for synthesis, as well as the relative weight of science and art in depicting this nature.

The afternoon concluded with a roundtable. It presented two projects that bring awareness of Humboldt's diverse legacies to both academic audiences and the general public. Ottmar Ette introduced the "Humboldt Project" of the *Andere Bibliothek*, the publishing series by one of Germany's most eminent contemporary intellectuals, Hans Magnus Enzensberger. In the fall of 2004, the *Andere Bibliothek* will republish some of Humboldt's key works, among them the original *Kosmos* in all its volumes, including Humboldt's additions, edited by Ottmar Ette and Oliver Lubrich. This unique and courageous project honors Humboldt and brings to life again Humboldt's role as a pioneer of what is often only attributed to our own post-modern epoch: a science society that is based on truly trans-disciplinary exchange and derives its innovative character from a constant trans-border communication not only among experts but in society at large. *Ingrid* and *Andrea Lotze* showed how this ideal can materialize today in a concrete local setting that attracts international scholars: the Humboldt Field Research Institute/Eagle Hill Foundation (see <http://www.eaglehill.us/>). Located on the coast of Maine, the Humboldt Field Research Institute attracts scientists, naturalists, artists, and the general public to conduct research and attend educational seminars that follow the ideal of trans-disciplinary collaboration. Since 1987, the institute has been offering an extensive series of seminars. In addition, since the mid-1990s, the institute has published the *Northeastern Naturalist*, a quarterly peer-reviewed journal that features original research articles on a wide range of topics.

The next morning featured two more sessions. The first was devoted to "Humboldt, Art, and Culture." *Laura Dassow Walls's* paper traced the importance of Humboldt's *Cosmos* in American literature from Washington Irving to Ralph Waldo Emerson to Henry David Thoreau, who used his rediscovery of Humboldt to revise his famous *Walden*. Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman responded to Humboldt, too, and all of these writers helped inscribe a notion of Humboldtian thinking into nature writing in the United States throughout the nineteenth century. Humboldt's enormous impact on North American landscape painting was the topic of *Gerald L. Carr's* paper. He concentrated on Frederic Church, Humboldt's "prime North American artistic disciple." Church read *Cosmos* early on and thus refined his view of tropical scenes. These became one of Church's favorite subjects, as Carr showed with examples such as Church's *Cayambe* (1858) and *Heart of the Andes* (1859).

The last session of the conference addressed once more the complex issue of how to evaluate Humboldt's view of Latin America in the light of recent critiques of colonialism and imperialism. *Georgina Endfield* spoke to the role of eurocentric ideology and local environmental knowledge in the development of Humboldt's geography of New Spain. Although we may identify biases in the traveler's work, Endfield demonstrated through a close reading of Humboldt's writings on Mexico that a simple critique does not do justice to Humboldt's subtle conceptualizations of the social, cultural, environmental, economic, geographical, and other characteristics of Mexico. These were influenced by, but transcended, prevalent Eurocentric ideologies of the New World. Endfield emphasized that Humboldt's research was informed by local historical sources and environmental knowledge. In his paper, *Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra* focused on the origins of Humboldt's ideas about the Andes as a microcosmic space, a natural laboratory for testing theories of biodistribution. He argued that Humboldt encountered a local intelligentsia that had already described the rich ecological

variations within their polities, and that Humboldt learned to read the Andes in part because local Spanish American scholars had for decades, if not centuries, been developing this idea. Cañizares-Esguerra gave examples from the writings and approaches to nature by, among others, León Pinelo in the seventeenth century, José Celestino Mutis in the eighteenth century, and José de Caldas (1768-1816) to underscore the richness of local knowledge.

The conference concluded with a final discussion that emphasized the value of taking Alexander von Humboldt as a prism to study not only South, but North American culture. The various ramifications of Humboldtian thinking in North American culture, the reciprocal influences with Central American cultures, and the astonishing prominence of Humboldt as a public figure in the United States throughout the nineteenth century, circumscribe new topics in historical scholarship on Humboldt and transatlantic relations in the early modern and modern eras. All contributors expressed their wish to see these new directions pursued further. Conveners and participants are currently exploring possibilities of publishing the conference proceedings.

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