



“In Whose Heads I Would Like My Ideas To Live”: Humboldt’s Interest in the United States*

“En cuyas cabezas me gustaría que vivieran mis ideas”: el interés de Humboldt por los Estados Unidos

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Abstract: Alexander von Humboldt’s decision to add a visit to the United States at the end of his expedition has led to various speculations about the motives of this change in his itinerary and the particular moment during his voyage when he took this decision. This article argues that his stay in North America forms an important part of his American Expedition and is crucial to better understanding both the historical context and the larger impact of his journey. It therefore addresses this topic based on a thorough analysis of his first references to this country and the information he received about the young republic during his time in the Spanish colonies. In particular, it focuses on the role the Louisiana Purchase had played in this context and the possibilities he saw regarding the scientific exploration of the newly acquired territory.

Keywords: Humboldtian Science; United States; American West; Louisiana Purchase; Cuba.

Resumen: La decisión de Alejandro de Humboldt de añadir una visita a los Estados Unidos al final de su expedición ha llevado a diversas especulaciones sobre los motivos de este cambio en su itinerario y el momento concreto de su viaje en el que tomó esta decisión. Este artículo argumenta que su estancia en este país forma parte importante de su Expedición Americana

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y que es crucial para entender mejor tanto el contexto histórico como el impacto de su periplo americano a mayor escala. Se acerca a este tema en base a un exhaustivo análisis de sus primeras referencias de los Estados Unidos y de la información que Humboldt obtuvo de la joven república durante el tiempo que permaneció en las posesiones españolas en América. En particular, se enfoca en el papel que desempeñó la compra de la Luisiana en este contexto, así como en las posibilidades que observó en relación con la exploración científica del territorio recién adquirido.

Palabras clave: Ciencia humboldtiana; Estados Unidos; Oeste americano; Compra de la Luisiana; Cuba.

Throughout his American expedition, Alexander von Humboldt had practiced a perfect combination of following an outlined itinerary, while at the same time always maintaining his flexibility to adapt it spontaneously to new opportunities. On some occasions this allowed him to react to any unexpected difficulties, finding instant solutions to these problems. In other situations, he decided to follow recommendations to make new acquaintances or to add visits to places that were described to him as important for his scientific pursuits. This approach can be observed from the very beginning of his American expedition. He was examining different options to undertake this voyage in the context of a French government expedition, before his path finally took him to Madrid. Also, his decision to leave Cuba during his first visit in 1801 and try to catch up with the expedition of Thomas Baudin, instead of traveling to Mexico and the Philippines as initially planned, is another illustrative example. Humboldt had good reasons for all these changes, though some are better and some are less well known to us today. Specifically, the explorer's decision to add a visit to the United States at the end of his expedition through the Spanish colonies has led to much speculation about the origin and the moment of this modification to his itinerary, at a time when he was prepared to return to Europe after carrying out his scientific expedition through the Spanish colonies for almost five years.

Interestingly, as in the case of his stay in Spain prior to his visit, Humboldt's time in the United States tends to be viewed as rather disconnected from what today is understood as his Latin American expedition, without looking sufficiently at its connection with his ambitious scientific project and the global implementation of Humboldtian Science. However, these were not merely two brief visits that happened to frame the Prussian's voyage of exploration through the Spanish colonies; his stays in both countries constitute an important part of his larger scientific pursuits. Having a closer look at the motives he had for undertaking a visit to the United States at the end of his expedition is therefore crucial in order to understand the socio-historical context of his journey on the one hand, and on the other, the global significance of his scientific endeavors. Humboldt not only initiated a new stage in the relationship between Iberoamerica and Europe, but also helped to establish close scholarly connections between the United States and the Old Continent. While the Spanish colonies were on the eve

of their independence movements, and therefore would eagerly incorporate Humboldt into their political struggle, at the moment of his visit in 1804 to the United States only two decades had passed since the country had become a new and independent nation. Hence, it was still at an early moment in the process of nation-building, and the Prussian's visit occurred with perfect timing for this larger goal.

While it is quite obvious, given Humboldt's critical comments about the situation of colonial societies, why he was intrigued with visiting an independent nation at that point of his voyage, we still need to look at the origins of his interest for this country: at what point in his life did he become intrigued by the United States? Where do we find the first references expressing his concern for this country?

EARLY INTEREST IN THE YOUNG DEMOCRACY

It seems that Humboldt's interest goes back to the time when he was a student at the Commercial Academy in Hamburg, from August 1790 until April 1791. This famous academy, founded in 1768 by Johann Georg Büsch, received students from all over Europe and even from the New World. During the Prussian's time there, Christoph Daniel Ebeling (1741-1817), one of the most distinguished German experts on the geography and history of North America, was teaching at the institution, and the future explorer happened to be one of his students. In his classes Ebeling passed on to his students his fascination for the United States and the vision he had for the future development of the country (Stewart 1976: 151-61). He is also known for the impressive library he created, collecting all types of publications and cartographic material concerning the United States (Brown 1940: 471-479; Author unknown 1818: 208-211),¹ which Humboldt eagerly used, and for the very active and extensive correspondence network he had established over the years with many people in the young nation (Ebeling/Coolidge Lane 1926). Ebeling was therefore unusually well informed about the situation of this country and its latest developments in all fields, and thus decided to use his wealth of knowledge to prepare a wide-ranging work on the geography and history of North America. This appeared under the title *Erdbeschreibung und Geschichte von Amerika*, consisted of seven volumes produced between 1793 and 1816, and received much attention on both sides of the Atlantic (Ebeling 1793-1816). In addition, together with Dietrich Hermann Hegewisch, during the years 1795-1797 Ebeling published the *Amerikanisches Magazin*, the first scholarly magazine in Germany that dealt with all aspects related to the United States.

Interestingly, Humboldt's teacher had already foreseen the role the country would play on the global stage decades later in terms of its economic, political and cultural leadership. It seems that his vision of the young democracy aroused the curiosity of his

¹ Ebeling's collection was purchased by Israel Thorndyke in the year after his death, and given by him to Harvard College.

students, since several of them later undertook shorter or longer visits to the United States. Humboldt was one of them, as were the merchant Georg Heinrich Sieveking and Friedrich von Laffert, an administrative lawyer and botanist. It was also most likely Ebeling who drew Humboldt's particular attention to the importance of commerce for the development of the new nation, providing him with his own analysis of the economic future he foresaw for the United States.

From his time as a student in Hamburg we have an interesting expression of his early interest in this country. In 1791 he wrote to his friend Samuel Thomas von Sömmering that his tutor, Joachim Heinrich Campe, was going to North America for a year to study the Constitution of the United States and to proclaim it in the Old World, in order to "disseminate freedom and the truth about the people". As Humboldt confessed, he was intrigued by this idea and every day awaited a letter of invitation to join his tutor in his travels.² Since this did not happen, over the following years he focused on his own professional projects and began to contemplate other possible expeditions that were rather oriented towards the exotic areas of the world. His curiosity for the United States seemed to languish during that time until, rather unexpectedly, during his expedition the opportunity arose that also allowed him to see this part of the New World, and to a certain extent, to take up and continue the interest of his teacher, Ebeling, in the young democracy and its political and economic development. However, as early as the beginning of his American expedition, years before actually planning his visit, while travelling around Cumaná in modern-day Venezuela, he added an interesting reflection in a letter to his friend Ludwig Bollmann. While expressing his pessimistic view of the moral situation of Europe at that moment, particularly describing the events in France, he makes a rather intriguing and apparently unconnected comment concerning the United States: "Ideas can only be useful if they come to life in the minds of many people", Humboldt stated, and in North America there were writers "in whose heads I would like my ideas to live".³ Unfortunately, at this point he does not develop this idea any further, nor does he mention any specific names of people he was thinking about. However, it reveals his view of this country as a place where enlightened ideas were able to prosper.

Another important hint can be found in a letter Humboldt sent to Karl Ludwig Willdenow in February 1801. In this lengthy note, with much detailed information about his work, he talks about the Scottish botanist John Fraser (1750-1811), whom he met during his first visit to Cuba. Since 1780 Fraser had been traveling around the world, from North America and the West Indies to Russia and elsewhere, collecting plant specimens, and from 1795 onwards occasionally acted as a commissioned plant collector in Russian service. In 1783 or 1784 he had initiated his first journey to the

² Humboldt to Samuel Thomas von Sömmering, 28 January 1791, in Jahn/Lange (1973: 121-124).

³ Humboldt to Ludwig Bollmann, 15 October 1799, in Moheit (1993: 63). Original text in German: "Ideen können nur nützen, wenn sie in vielen Köpfen lebendig werden. Sie haben in Nord-Amerika physiolog[ische] Schriftsteller, in deren Köpfen ich meinen Ideen Leben wünschte".

American south, to Charleston, South Carolina. On the return trip he continued to the Piedmont region of the Appalachians into Georgia, along the southeastern edge of the southern Blue Ridge Mountains, and in 1787 reached Pickens County, near Chickamauga Cherokee territory. Two years later he trekked through the Alleghenies at a time when such travel was mainly limited to indigenous peoples' trails.

In the year 1799, this time with his eldest son John, he undertook another voyage to America and the West Indies, visiting Thomas Jefferson at Monticello and then making an extended journey through Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, and northern Georgia. They returned to Charleston in December 1800 and from there they travelled to Cuba. However, on their way to Havana they were shipwrecked on a coral reef, and although they were lucky enough to be rescued by a Spanish ship, they lost everything. That was the point where his path crossed with Humboldt's, who had arrived for the first time in Havana just shortly before, and this coincidence turned out to be a very fortunate encounter for both of them: As the Prussian comments to Willdenow, he was able to help Fraser out in this difficult situation, inviting him to stay in his home and providing him with money and anything else he needed.

However, these were not the only problems the Scottish botanist had to face at this point. Fraser had arrived in Cuba with the goal of collecting plants; however, he was completely unaware of the fact that he needed an authorization of the crown in order to carry out research in the Spanish colonies. And he soon had to face the difficulties that arose from doing this without permission. It was thus a lucky chance for Fraser that he met with Humboldt, who was perfectly acquainted with the procedure. Through his connections, as the Prussian continues to explain in his letter, he was also able to help with this problem and to obtain a permission for his colleague that allowed him to travel round the island. Given the time they spent together and the fact that they pursued similar scientific goals, they became friends: so much so that Humboldt even suggested including Fraser's son in his expedition.⁴ Though this idea ultimately proved impractical, Humboldt took advantage of the opportunity to send several specimen collections back to London with the younger John Fraser. More importantly, it may have been Fraser who opened Humboldt's eyes to the possibility of traveling to the United States and meeting Thomas Jefferson, who shortly afterwards was to become the third president of the United States. The fact that Humboldt seemed to be so well-informed about possible routes from Havana via Charleston to Philadelphia, as we shall see later, is most likely due to this chance meeting in Cuba.

In any case, the crucial question at this point is for what specific reason, and at what particular point during his expedition, Humboldt changed his initial idea and decided to add a visit to the United States. In several letters he had announced his intention to return directly to Europe via Mexico and Cuba, but no document has yet been found that indicates the moment Humboldt took that decision and started

⁴ Humboldt to Karl Ludwig Willdenow, 21 February 1801, in Moheit (1993: 122-131).

to prepare his travels to finally see the young democracy. Thus, unfortunately, there is no clear answer to that question and we have to reconstruct this moment from the sources available. The only information we have for certain is that Humboldt arrived on 19 March 1804 for his second visit to Havana. About three weeks after his arrival in Cuba, on 12 April, Humboldt was issued a passport, granted by Salvador José de Muro y Salazar, the Marquis of Someruelos, in his role as Captain General of Cuba, that allowed him to proceed with his travels to the United States. This shows that in less than a month he had prepared all the necessary steps for his journey to North America. Nevertheless, he had to wait for another seventeen days before he could board the cargo ship *Concepción* on 29 April to sail to Philadelphia. His second stay in Havana would thus be an important turning point for the Prussian explorer: instead of ending his American expedition there, as he had initially planned, with this visit he opened a whole new and very different chapter in his life. It was the point at which Humboldt stepped out of the sphere of influence of the Spanish empire and began his connection to the expanding United States: a connection that would prove to become extraordinarily important for both sides over the decades to come.

Nevertheless, it has not yet been possible to retrace what happened during his month in Cuba and what exactly made him modify his plan to return directly to the Old Continent. In this context it would be most useful to know when and where our intrepid explorer heard about the Louisiana Purchase for the first time: In October 1803, only a few months before his arrival in Philadelphia, the United States Senate had ratified the acquisition of the Louisiana territory, a former Spanish possession now in French hands, stretching from west of the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains, which meant that the young nation would double its size. On the one hand, this transaction accelerated the disintegration of the Spanish empire, already in decline; on the other, it built the foundation for the westward expansion of the young nation, and its rise as a new empire during the nineteenth century. Through this chain of events, Humboldt became involved in the concerns and strategic pursuits of both nations. He was aware that the consequent start of government-promoted reconnaissance of the American West in May of 1804, was the perfect moment for a personal encounter with the American president, who in those years also acted as president of the *American Philosophical Society*, the nation's most prestigious learned society. However, the interesting question still remains: At what point would he become aware of Jefferson's vision for the West and, in consequence of the territorial expansion, the preparation of the first United States exploration into this region?

PREPARATION OF HIS VISIT IN HAVANA

A much repeated interpretation in Humboldtian scholarship is to see Vincent F. Gray, the Vice-Consular Commercial Agent of the United States in Havana, as the person who convinced Humboldt to undertake this visit. When the Prussian explorer arrived

in the city in March 1804, it has been understood, Gray learned that he was in possession of important geographical information concerning the disputed border regions of the newly acquired Louisiana Territory. Aware of the strategic importance of this wealth of knowledge for the American government at that moment, and the potential benefits for his country that could come from this contact, he decided to write to Secretary of State James Madison in order to make him aware of the favorable opportunity to meet the famous explorer. However, as recent research has shown, this is an inaccurate conclusion.

Gray did send three dispatches to Secretary of State James Madison, so let us take a closer look at these documents. In the first letter written on 28 April 1804 he introduced the Prussian traveler, pointing explicitly to the fact that he could be of interest for his government, as a source of useful and necessary documents and first-hand knowledge: "Baron Humboldt, Supreme Counsellor of Mines in the Service of His Prussian Majesty and member of the Royal Academy of Sciences at Berlin", he wrote, was traveling "for the purpose of advancing the progress of natural history". Humboldt was now on his return from South America and New Spain back to Europe, via the United States, he informed Madison, and Gray took "leave to recommend him to your particular friendship and protection, during his stay in the United States". Interestingly, here Gray only mentions the connection to the Prussian Court, but not the fact that Humboldt's exploration of the Spanish colonies was undertaken under the specific protection of the Spanish crown.⁵ In a second note written the same day, the American agent added that Madison would receive a letter from the Captain General of Cuba, the Marquis of Someruelos,⁶ concerning Humboldt, whom he had recommended to his attention, believing that he would feel "much gratified by being personally acquainted with him".⁷ A few days later, in another letter sent to Madison, when Humboldt had just left the country, Gray was more explicit concerning the interest of the explorer for his nation. Here he refers to an article that Humboldt had published in the Cuban journal *Aurora: Correo político-económico de la Havana*.⁸ "These (remarks) cannot be otherwise than interesting at this moment", he affirmed, "particularly as he is now on his route to the city of Washington, and will have it in his power to give you much useful information relative to the country adjoining Louisiana".⁹

⁵ Vincent F. Gray to James Madison, April 28, 1804, James Madison Papers at the Library of Congress. In: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mjm.08_0283_0284/> (24.01.2019).

⁶ Governor Someruelos's letter to James Madison has not been found.

⁷ Vincent Gray to James Madison, 28 April 1804, in *The Papers of James Madison* (2005: 121-123).

⁸ Here he refers to an article that Humboldt had published in a Cuban journal: "Geografía física. Ideas sobre el límite inferior de la nieve perpétua, y sobre la geografía de las plantas; por el Señor Baron de Humboldt, traducidas del frances al castellano por A. R.", in: *Aurora: Correo Político-Económico de La Habana*, nº 220, 2 May 1804, p. 137-144. (A.R. stands for Antonio Robredo)

⁹ Vincent Gray to James Madison, 8 May 1804, in *The Papers of James Madison* (2005: 190-192).

In the course of our searches for any kind of early reference to the United States, several illuminating letters as well as other documents have been seen that shed light on the question of when and where he decided to add a visit to this country. Already in March of 1804, only one week after his arrival in Havana, he mentioned details of his planned travels to Philadelphia, interestingly by way of the town of Charleston: "I will leave in 15 days to Charleston, from there to Philadelphia and then back to France", he writes to his friend Christiane von Haefen.¹⁰ The following day he also informs his brother Wilhelm that he planned to stay for only two or three weeks in Havana and then to proceed to Charleston, which he estimated would take him five to nine days by ship. From there he intended to travel to Philadelphia on land, while having his belongings shipped by boat, which might take another fourteen days. His plan was to stay not longer than six weeks in Philadelphia, in order to be able to arrive in Paris in June 1804.¹¹ These letters give us two important hints: first, they show that Humboldt's explicit goal was to visit Philadelphia; the city was thus not only his port of arrival but his main destination. And second, it becomes obvious how well informed he was already at that moment about the travel connection from Havana to Charleston, as well as the time the journey would take from Charleston onwards. This leads us to suspect that it was might have been his encounter with Fraser, during his first visit to the island, and the precise information the Scottish botanist had provided him about his travels through this country, that had inspired Humboldt to undertake this voyage himself. In any case, though he planned to leave on the frigate *Middelton*, due to sail on 17 April for Charleston, the trip was delayed by customs difficulties. Humboldt thus needed to wait for the next opportunity to initiate his journey to the United States, on the cargo ship *Concepción*, which offered the advantage that it would take him directly to Philadelphia.

However, additional comments found in Spain's official government journal, the *Gaceta de Madrid*, indicate that already weeks before his arrival in Cuba, while still in Mexico, Humboldt had taken the decision to direct his path towards the young republic in North America. After a false alarm had been circulated by different journals with the erroneous information of Humboldt's death in Acapulco, any information about his fate that reached the *Gaceta de Madrid* had been avidly taken up and published. It was in this context that the journal confirmed the existence of a letter that Humboldt had sent to Caroline von Humboldt, in fact one of the last he wrote from Mexico, in which he announced his plans to travel to the United States and stay there for a few months. In addition, a young Spaniard from the Basque region

¹⁰ Humboldt to Christiane von Haefen, 27 March 1804, in Moheit (1993: 283-284).

¹¹ Humboldt to Wilhelm von Humboldt, 28 March 1804; letter mentioned in a letter his brother sent to Christiane von Haefen on 9 June 1804, in Moheit (1993: 284).

named Íñigo González y Azaola, who accompanied Humboldt on his expeditions in Mexico at the end of the year 1803, had sent several letters addressed to his brother Gregorio, Assistant to the Royal Chemistry Laboratory of Madrid, in which he gave news about the famous Prussian. His brother in turn passed the letters to the *Gaceta de Madrid*, and it is through this connection that we discover some important details: In one of them, written on 27 October 1803, Azaola makes a revealing statement, commenting that Humboldt had already prepared his baggage as well as his documents in order to travel to Philadelphia. In another note to his brother, sent four weeks later, Azaola tells him that the famous explorer was looking forward to his return to Europe and to start working on the publications with the outcome of his expedition. However, as Humboldt seems to have mentioned to his Spanish colleague, he was concerned about the war in Europe, and in particular afraid to embark on a Spanish ship under the circumstances.¹² The war he referred to was the hostilities that rose again after the end of the Treaty of Amiens in May 1803. The treaty had been signed on 25 March 1802 to end the enmities between the French Republic and Great Britain during the French Revolutionary Wars. However, the established agreements were not respected and the treaty broke down when Britain declared war on France and consequently on its ally, Spain. These tensions escalated into a continuation of the Anglo-Spanish War when the British captured a squadron of Spanish frigates carrying gold bullion to Cadiz and the Spanish responded with a declaration of War in December 1804. This shows that Humboldt's concern to navigate under a Spanish flag, on a ship that might potentially be captured by the British was indeed a realistic possibility, and his efforts to eliminate this risk thus proved to be a wise decision. Azaola also explained to his brother that he had originally hoped to be able to return to Europe with Humboldt, but when he saw that possibility disappear, he finally decided to travel via Acapulco to Manila in the Philippines, where he would later own plantations.

While the documents still provide no explicit reason for the modification of his itinerary, the timing is indeed revealing: the acquisition of the Louisiana territory was ratified in October 1803, the same month Azaola communicated Humboldt's plan to proceed to the United States. It thus seems likely that he was still in Mexico when he had heard about this significant territorial expansion of the United States. He could easily foresee the impact this purchase would have on the future of the United States and the value of the material in his possession under these new circumstances. He might also have been immediately aware of the interesting opportunities that could arise for him in the context of the scientific exploration of those lands. Such a promising constellation on the horizon might have been one of the main reasons for his wish to become acquainted with the political and scientific leaders of the young nation.

¹² *Gaceta de Madrid*, N^o. 58, 20 July 1804, p. 638.

In any case, it becomes clear that the visit was on Humboldt's own initiative, and that the American representative on the island of Cuba simply served as an intermediary who initiated the diplomatic preparations for his encounter with the United States government.

It is helpful to have a closer look at the politico-economic situation in Cuba at the time and at the position the American agent held within this context. At that time the Spanish administration did not recognize foreign colonial diplomats, and typically referred to American officials in Cuba as "commercial agents", a term significantly more appropriate than "consul" for their duties. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, with the expansion of US-Cuba trade and the recent increase in coffee and sugar plantations, Americans who invested on the island depended on these merchant-diplomats. When Humboldt arrived in Havana, Gray, in his position as United States commercial agent, was a staunch ally of the American elite investing in trade with Cuba. He had moved to Cuba in the early 1800s to collect debts for American merchants and shortly afterwards started to work as a slave trader in the Havana commercial house of Antonio de Frías (Chambers 2016: 202-203; Coker 1992: 113). At a time when United States law banned the outfitting or building of slave ships in their country, Cuban ports still functioned as major hubs for American citizens involved in the slave trade, and it is in this context that Gray exercised his duties.

Gray would soon become one of the best connected American commercial agents in the region and a regular participant in the slave trade. His public position in Havana allowed him in those early years to attract extensive American business interests and become a key player for the United States establishment in Cuba. Not surprisingly, in this tense situation the Spanish authorities remained deeply concerned about the potential of these agents for foreign espionage and feared that, under the guise of commerce, their activities might incite instability in Cuba. They thus refused to acknowledge the United States consulate in Havana. There was a certain degree of suspicion focused around the figure of Gray, given the lack of separation between his official diplomatic position and the fact that he openly worked in the slave trade. Moreover, he even issued public consular documents under his private commercial seal as a slave trader, which therefore became the *de facto* public seal of the United States foreign service in Havana (Chambers 2016: 205). Given the diametrically opposed positions of Gray and Humboldt regarding the institution of slavery, we can assume that in general there was not much connection between both men regarding their ideas and convictions. It was thus more of a diplomatic move when the Prussian referred to him as "his friend in Havana" in his letter of introduction to Jefferson (Schwarz 2004: 89).

The diplomatic correspondence between the American agent and Secretary of State Madison during the time shortly before and after Humboldt's visit also reveals more about Cuban politics and the country's relationship to the United States in this period. Their conversation centered around the state of commerce on the island and, in par-

ticular, the danger of ships being captured by French pirates.¹³ This seems to have been the most pressing concern for Gray in those months, and he attempted to alert the United States government to this imminent problem. Joshua Blakely, the American representative in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba's second city, transmitted the same concerns to Madison. One week prior to Humboldt's departure, Blakely sent the Secretary of State a detailed description of the French privateers cruising in these seas, and provided a list of the American vessels being captured and brought into the ports.¹⁴ Madison, however, was already aware of the problem of French cruisers in Havana. It had previously been the topic of a conversation with the Spanish ambassador Carlos Martínez de Irujo, when the American minister criticized that "the use of Spanish ports in the West Indies, particularly Cuba, were allowed to French cruisers capturing American vessels", pointing to the circumstance that there were cases "where vessels had been actually sanctioned and sold as prizes within Spanish jurisdiction".¹⁵

Madison thus reacted quickly, and at the beginning of May he sent a letter of complaint about the situation reported by Gray and Blakely to the Marquis of Someruelos, the Captain General of Cuba, pointing out the dangers he saw for American trade in the region: "For some time past the commerce of the United States has been greatly harassed by certain irregular cruisers, under the French Flag", Madison wrote, "who have made use of the ports of the Island over which your Excellency presides as stations from which to cruise, and places of safety for the reception and sale of their prizes". This was considered to be "contrary to the obligations, and we presume the will of His Catholic Majesty", and the Secretary of State therefore expected the governor to act accordingly, so that "the abuses referred to will be rectified in that prompt and exact manner".¹⁶ It becomes clear that at the moment of Humboldt's planned return French pirates represented a serious danger of which he was aware and which he was eager to avoid.

In any case, given Gray's interests and activities in Havana as well as the type of information he transmitted to the United States government at that time, it is unlikely that he could have played an active role in the change in Humboldt's itinerary. Interestingly, if we look at the letters of introduction the United States representative sent to Madison, we find rather similar wording and arguments to those with which Humboldt had presented himself to Carlos IV at the Spanish court five years earlier (Puig-Samper 2001) as well as in the letter of introduction he would write shortly afterwards to the American president. In other words, all the letters sent by Vincent Gray in this context, may well have been drafted by Humboldt himself. Gray simply facilitated the connection to the United States as part of the diplomatic duties he car-

¹³ Vincent Gray to James Madison, 11 February 1804, in *The Papers of James Madison* (2002: 466-468); Vincent Gray to James Madison, 25 July 1804, in *The Papers of James Madison* (2005: 522-523).

¹⁴ Joshua Blakeley to James Madison, 20 April 1804, in *The Papers of James Madison* (2005: 90-91).

¹⁵ James Monroe to James Madison, 5 March 1804, in *The Papers of James Madison* (2002: 545-549).

¹⁶ Marquis of Someruelos to James Madison, 5 May 1804, in *The Papers of James Madison* (2002: 154-155).

ried out for his country. This procedure is similar to the situation five years earlier in Madrid, when he was received by the Spanish King, after being presented first to the Saxon diplomat Forell, who introduced him to Secretary of State Urquijo. Also in the case of Spain the corresponding documents seem to have been drafted by Humboldt himself. Last but not least, there is another important detail to take into account: the fact that these recommendations were sent to the United States at a moment when Humboldt was already in possession of the necessary passport for his visit. He did not depend on any specific answer in order to begin his journey north, nor did he wait to receive an invitation from the United States government. Gray merely informed Madison about Humboldt's pending visit, when everything was prepared, and pointed to the importance of being personally acquainted with the Prussian explorer at this specific moment.

Bearing all these circumstances in mind, it becomes obvious that Humboldt's visit to the United States was not based on a last moment modification of his plans while he was in Cuba. This idea had been well planned over several months, at least since October 1803: most likely he had heard about the pending acquisition of the Louisiana territory. Though it remains unclear where and when exactly this news had reached him, it is certain that Humboldt was immediately aware of its further political implications.

Another interesting comment from his diaries reveals an additional reason for his motivation in undertaking this visit: aboard the *Concepción* on May 9, on its way to Philadelphia, during violent stormy weather which caused the death of two people, Humboldt feared for his life but also for the scientific fruits of his five-year expedition, and seemed to question the real necessity of this trip. Here he mentions that it was undertaken to save his manuscripts and collections from "perfidious Spanish politics".¹⁷ Despite the generous travel authorization he had received from the Spanish Government, he still had some concerns about getting into difficulties with their authorities. With the example of other explorers in mind, Humboldt seems to have been worried that the Crown would try to get hold of the material he had gathered in their colonies and thus obtain control over the fruit of years of work. The opportunity to sail from Philadelphia to France therefore seemed to be a safer option than returning from Cuba to Europe, which would most likely have been on a Spanish ship. Even though it also meant taking the risk of running the British naval blockade or the possibility that the British, who were searching American vessels for French property, might take *citoyen* Bonpland prisoner. Astute and far-sighted as he was, Humboldt made a clear risk assessment as to the right decision with regard to his return to Europe. The risk that his manuscripts and collections could fall into British

¹⁷ Faak (1986: 397-398). French original: "Je me sentais très ému. Me voir périr à la veille de tant de jouissance, voir périr avec moi tous les fruits de mes travaux, être la cause de la mort des deux personnes qui m'accompagnaient, périr dans un voyage de Philadelphie qui ne paraissait pas de toute nécessité (quoique entrepris pour sauver nos manuscrits et collections contre la perfide politique espagnole)".

hands was thus less worrying than getting within reach of the Spanish authorities.. However, the option he chose clearly carried a greater risk for Bonpland, while Humboldt as a Prussian citizen had less to fear.

So it seems to have been a fortunate combination of specific personal interests and political circumstances that convinced him to see the United States before returning home to Europe. In any case, the fact that Humboldt extended his voyage at a moment when, after five years of traveling, he was anxious to return to Europe, underscores the importance he placed on this opportunity. Seeing the young democracy personally and making the acquaintance of important figures was indeed a memorable experience for him: he would meet the Founding Fathers and the architects of the first independent nation on the American continent, and learn at close hand the functioning of the first republican institutions in the New World, whose ideals he passionately shared.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES ON THE HORIZON FOR HUMBOLDTIAN SCIENCE

When Humboldt was about to leave the country, he appears to have been very sure about returning soon – a desire he had expressed on several other occasions. While still in Philadelphia he made a comment to Madison about his interest in seeing the United States again in a few years' time, when the way would be open from Missouri to the Pacific Ocean. Knowing the concern of the government for the exploration of the western regions of the country, he saw a possibility of contributing to this task himself. In his opinion the Great Lakes, Canada and the land from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains offered a vast field for geological exploration (Schwarz 2004: 94).¹⁸ Humboldt already had a clear idea of this second visit in mind and went into even more detail: With some aid from the United States government important research could be undertaken, he affirmed, for which he might even travel north as far as Mount Saint Elias in Alaska and the Russian possessions. Also to Albert Gallatin he expressed his regret at leaving this beautiful country, where “the progress of the human spirit and civil liberty presented such a brilliant spectacle”;¹⁹ and to William Thornton he wrote that he hoped to meet again one day in the United States, since “the country that stretches to the west of the mountains offers a wide field to conquer for the sciences”.²⁰ Finally, also to John Vaughan, he revealed his earnest desire

¹⁸ Humboldt to James Madison, June 19 and 20, 1804, in Schwarz (2004: 94). French original: “Il me paraît que je reverrai ce beau pays en peu d’années. Le chemin du Missouri aux côtés de l’Océan pacifique sera alors déjà ouvert. Les lacs, le Canada et l’immense bassin qui s’étend depuis Pittsburg aux montagnes vues par Fidler offrent un vaste champs aux recherches géologiques (...)”.

¹⁹ Humboldt to Albert Gallatin, June 29, 1804, in Schwarz (2004: 95). French original: “Quelque regret que j’ai de quitter si tôt ce beau pays, où les progrès de l’esprit humain et la liberté civile présentent un spectacle aussi brillant...”.

²⁰ Humboldt to William Thornton, 20 June 1804, in Schwarz (2004: 96). French original: “Ce pays qui s’étend à l’ouest des montagnes présente un vaste champs à conquérir pour les sciences”.

to be back soon among his new friends and to travel one day through the immense western region, along the Missouri, a plan for which he had not lost his enthusiasm, and for which he saw Jefferson as just the right man to support him.²¹ Still years after his return to Europe Humboldt favored the idea of another stay in the US. “If I am hindered from making my journey to the Great Indies,” he writes in 1810 to Charles Wilson Peale’s son Rembrandt, who was living in Paris at this time, “I will come to finish my life in your country of which I love the inhabitants, the land and above all the wise constitution.”²² Strangely, at least in his surviving correspondence with the president, he did not express these ideas openly, though he was perfectly aware of the fact that Jefferson’s eyes were set on America’s “continental destiny”.²³ However, it was Vaughan who sent the president the letter he had received from Humboldt, to make sure that Jefferson knew of the Prussian’s projects regarding the exploration of the West. This letter had given him much satisfaction, Vaughan stated, since “few who have visited us have been so well inclined to speak well of us”. Therefore, he wished that “the public”, which meant the Congress, “would put at your disposal the means of acquiring a full knowledge of this Country & its resources. It would be both honorable & useful”.²⁴

Despite these clear visions for the future, and the support he would receive in this part of the Americas, once back in Europe the Prussian found himself caught up in his ambitious publishing projects. Unfortunately he was unable to return to take an active part in the exploration of the American West. After so many re-affirmations of his idea of coming back to this country and expressing how much he missed his North American friends, it was Madison who reminded him of that promise, when almost thirty years later he had still not been able to make that second visit. Madison expressed his understanding for Humboldt’s situation but also left no doubt about how much he personally regretted that he would not see the Prussian again “There may be little hope now, that a fulfilment of your original intention, would be compatible with the many interesting demands on your time elsewhere”, he wrote, “I can only assure you therefore, that, on a more favorable supposition, you wd. no where be welcomed by more general gratulations than among the Citizens of the United States”.²⁵

However, throughout his life Humboldt would maintain a vivid interest for the scientific reconnaissance of the West, starting with the Lewis and Clark expedition that had just left shortly before Humboldt’s arrival and followed by numerous other exploration voyages over the next decades (Rebok 2018). The United States embodied Humboldt’s ideal not only in the political sense but also in the way these enlight-

²¹ Humboldt to John Vaughan, 10 June 1805, in Schwarz (2004: 105).

²² Humboldt to Rembrandt Peale, 15 September 1810, in Schwarz (2004: 116).

²³ Unfortunately, there are no records revealing the content of their personal conversations in Washington.

²⁴ John Vaughan to Thomas Jefferson, 14 October 1805, in: <<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-2469>> (24 January 2019).

²⁵ James Madison to Humboldt, 12 March 1833, in Schwarz (2004: 186).

ened principles were applied to the progress of science. He was particularly impressed by the active role its government played in the promotion of scientific knowledge, and on several occasions praised the fact that scholars or explorers received public support for their projects. This was in accordance with his conviction that the progress of science should be used for the improvement of society, and thus be part of the responsibility of government. It should not be left to intrepid individuals, dedicating their personal wealth to this ambitious goal. The efforts of the government to popularize the scientific pursuits of the nation would motivate the population to contribute to this process. In the United States, by the second half of the nineteenth century there were numerous local and regional voluntary societies, building an institutional network that used the interest of individuals for scientific advancement. The fact that also many individuals in the United States participated enthusiastically in Humboldt's networks, providing him with all kind of information, was certainly connected to his constantly growing fame. However, it also had to do with his effort to make people participate in a scientific project that to a certain extent was considered a national enterprise (Goldstein 2008: 519-546). For Humboldt it was a clear indication of how science could develop in a free and liberal society, without the boundaries of colonialism, the lack of free-thinking and the obstacles imposed by dogmatic catholic belief. This was the perfect setting for his scientific method and philosophy: Humboldtian Science needed to be implemented in a free nation, guided by an enlightened government, in order to develop under the most favorable circumstances. For all these reasons, the United States seemed to the Prussian explorer to be an extremely receptive country for his science, but also for his own professional future.

In addition, the historic circumstances also turned out to be the perfect timing for Humboldt's visit. He arrived precisely at a moment when his science was beginning to be useful for American interests: Jefferson had been waiting for years for the weakening of the Spanish Empire, and now his opportunity had arrived. In the decades to follow the nation was constantly extending its borders and seeking to explore new territories, and in many ways the Prussian and his expertise proved instrumental in the process. The United States sought to grow as a nation, to become a global player on an international stage, and saw it as very advantageous to involve the world-famous explorer in the project. These circumstances strongly favored collaboration between Humboldt and the young American empire –a connection that would also be of considerable benefit to the Prussian explorer. Thus, over the following decades he would have the opportunity of being closely connected to the rise of the nation, on its way to becoming, by the end of the century, not only a powerful nation but also a leader in the field of science. Given these circumstances, where Humboldtian science fell on very fertile ground, there was a great need for the type of information he had in his hands and the kind of expertise he had achieved. The prospect of achieving global standing by means of this leading authority in science, well connected with the scholarly community in the Old World, but without representing the European powers involved in the process of colonization of North America, seemed to be a

promising combination for the United States government. The broad scope of Humboldt's work included the useful sciences needed for the growth of the country, such as the fields of oceanography, cartography, geology, agriculture and mineralogy. Much was still to be developed—the establishment of a nation-wide university system, different academic institutions or scientific societies, publishing presses, a system of transatlantic book exchange, or the creation of scientific journals. In this context the Prussian would find fewer obstacles in his way for his numerous ideas and projects, and he was able to test the relevance and applicability of his knowledge. Americans from all scholarly fields and of different generations were eager to establish contact with him, and provided him with the information and material he needed. His requests were answered promptly, and he was constantly kept updated on the scientific progress of the country. Humboldt, for his part, showed great interest in making his works known in this country, and explicitly attempted to use his connections to promote American editions of his work. Over the years he would invest a considerable amount of time and effort to make the United States an active part of his network of knowledge.²⁶ As a consequence his correspondence in the United States grew continuously over time and space, from the time of his first visit until the very end of his life, from places on the East coast, extending progressively to the West. Here the reciprocal exchange of knowledge that he sought would work more efficiently, and the networks he established were extensive, long-lasting and successful. Also the openness of American media, the freedom of speech assured under the First Amendment and, in general, a more entrepreneurial environment did contribute to a more effective circulation of knowledge.

As it turned out, while Spanish science was crucial for the preparation of Humboldt's American voyage, as a result of historical changes—and his flexibility to quickly adapt to them—the outcome of this expedition happened to have a stronger impact on the development of North American science. Nevertheless, whatever his personal ideological preferences might have been—an independent nation based on enlightened values aroused far more sympathy in him than a repressive monarchy—Humboldt did not favor one country over the other in terms of his scientific approach. Just as he was not tied to one academic discipline, one university or one specific idea, as a true cosmopolitan scholar he showed no exclusive attachment to any country. Instead, he followed his own convictions throughout his life, free from economic worries for much of the time. His incomparable success is due to these extremely favorable circumstances: While for other explorers or naturalists, with less flexibility, certain developments would have raised major obstacles in their way, Humboldt was able to turn them into new opportunities.

²⁶ Currently a second monograph is being prepared as a result of the same research project on Humboldt and the United States, that focuses on the scholarly networks he created and the impact they had on the development of the sciences in this country: *Expanding the Frontiers of American Science: Alexander von Humboldt's Networks of Knowledge*.

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