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➤ Alexander von Humboldt: The American Hemisphere and TransArea Studies

A Euphoric Relationship to Knowledge and Science

In one of his first communiqués out of America, in a letter composed in Cumano, South America and dated 16 July 1799 (Humboldt 1993: 41), Alexander von Humboldt wrote to his brother Wilhelm:

What trees! Coconut palms, fifty to sixty feet high, Poinciana pulcherrima, with foot-high bunches of the most splendid bright red blossoms; pisange and a crowd of trees with enormous leaves and fragrant flowers as large as your hand and of which we had no previous knowledge. Just think, this land is so unknown that a new genus which Mutis (see *Cavanilles iconus*, tom. 4) published only two years ago is a big shady tree sixty feet in height. We were so happy yesterday to find this magnificent plant (it had inch-long filaments). But how large is the number of smaller plants that we have yet to observe? And such colors as have the birds, the fishes, and even the crabs (sky-blue and yellow)! We run around now like fools; in the first three days we could not classify anything, as we were always throwing one object away to take up another. Bonpland claimed he would lose his mind if the miracle did not soon stop. But yet more beautiful than these miracles taken individually is the impression made by the whole of this powerful, sumptuous and yet so light, bright and mild world of plants. I feel that I will be happy here and that these impressions will succeed in amusing me frequently in the future as well (Humboldt 1993: 42).

There is hardly another passage in the extensive works of Alexander von Humboldt that expresses that same intense feeling of happiness which the young European felt shortly after his arrival in the regions that he sometimes called “South America” and sometimes just “America” (Humboldt 1993: 41). Expressions of happiness occur throughout the letter and encompass not only the “happiness” experienced for the duration of the sea voyage – on which he “worked quite a lot en route” (Humboldt 1993: 41) – and in running the blockade formed by English warships, but the personal experience of his own happiness as well as that shared with his French traveling companion Aimé Bonpland. Just as the voyage seemed to be sailing under a favorable star, even after

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Humboldt discerned, on July 4, “for the first time, perfectly clearly, the entire Southern Cross” (Humboldt 1993: 42), the experience of the new in the “New World” produced in the two European travelers an intense feeling of happiness paired with euphoric unrest. Alexander von Humboldt had finally realized the great dream articulated in many of his youthful letters: he had finally left behind – like his friend Georg Forster – the “Old World” on a journey to non-European regions. And still he was only on the threshold of his American adventure and of those new discourses concerning the New World which he would develop in the ensuing years and decades in increasingly complex ways.

The happiness conveyed in the letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt was most obviously not to be divorced from the scientific dimension of the research trip. The rapture which Humboldt attempted to express in an ever wider and more colorful vocabulary was the result of a shift, a dislocation in which the two Europeans ran about like lunatics, like “fools” (Humboldt 1993: 42), and were incapable of concentrating on a single object so as to submit it to reasonable analysis. They were in the grip of wonder in the face of a “miracle” (Humboldt 1993: 42), comparable to the tropical awe that seized the European mariners and “discoverers” on Columbus’ initial voyages. Stephen Greenblatt has made clear the resulting dilemma for European knowledge and science:

The antiquarian maxim said *nil admirari*. But confronted with the New World, the classical model of mature and balanced impartiality seemed both inappropriate and impossible. Columbus’ voyage was the beginning of a century of wonder. European culture experienced something along the lines of a “surprise reflex” that we can observe in small children: wide eyes, outstretched arms, holding one’s breath for a moment, the whole body tensed (Greenblatt 1994: 27 f.).

From the very first landing in a bounteous tropical world, European wonderment in the face of so many marvels naturally possessed a dimension that strived for knowledge and tried to conjoin a new world with old and antiquarian knowledge in a very reductionist fashion.¹ Is Alexander von Humboldt therefore merely a new, a “second Columbus,” as he was so often described in the further course of the history of his reception?² Does he simply repeat the gestures and *res gestae* for which the great discoverers had already set the example and in a way even predetermined? Are Humboldt and Bonpland thus caught in the trap of the perception of the other in occidental culture that enters the gray area of colonial expansion and an imperial(ist) view?

What is certain is that Alexander von Humboldt – who, thanks to his mother of Huguenot stock, could have borne the surname Humboldt y Colomb³ – all his life alluded to Cristóbal Colón not only in the account of his journey but throughout his work. And yet it would be an oversight not to recognize that along with Humboldt’s admiration for Columbus came a critical reflection and self-ironic distance that allows discoverers to speak of other discoverers – but in a detached way. The “surprise reflex” – of which Stephen Greenblatt speaks with a view to Columbus and the “beginning of a century of

¹ See Todorov (1985), in particular the chapter “Colón als Hermeneut” (Todorov 1985: 23-46).

² See Ette (1992).

³ See also Ette (1997).

wonder” (Greenblatt 1994: 27) – was for Alexander von Humboldt always stage-managed, a reflected reflex, as it were, which took into consideration the reactions of the addressee or reader. Portrayal of the greatest adventures and the increasingly (judging from other letters) intentional dramatization of danger to life and limb of the travelers – these were depictions Alexander liked to reserve for letters to his brother. In his writing, Alexander von Humboldt is always highly conscious of his readership.

Yet in Humboldt’s first letter from America to his older brother – who received it at the end of October 1799 in Spain – he did not solely portray his sense of wonder and feelings of happiness. For the experience of decolonization and dislocation, of the external and inner emotional ebb and flow in beholding the great size and surprising colors of each object encountered by the German-French research team, is at once coupled with the attempt to re-localize this dislocation through recourse to scientific practice in America itself and thus to a *scientific community* in the New World. Humboldt’s reference to the research of the famous Spanish botanist José Celestino Mutis – who since 1760 had been working in New Granada and who Humboldt would later visit in the viceroy seat of Bogotá at great expense and with no less hoopla in order to compare “hay” (Humboldt 1986: 93)⁴ (meaning his plant collections) with that of this central figure of the Enlightenment in New Granada – adumbrates that technique of the classic Humboldt expedition which was of fundamental significance for Humboldtian scientific practice: not only in undertaking a trip to the research objects themselves but to the native researchers and their results as well, and not only to the riches of nature but also to those of the archives and libraries of the Spanish colonial empire. Later Humboldt would not only promote the western tradition of knowledge but would also permit members of the creole elite, of mestizo authors and of indigenous cultures, to have their say, for example, in his *Vues des Cordillères et Monumens des Peuples Indigènes*. Unlike with Buffon or de Pauw, Raynal or Robertson, in the writings of the Prussian scholar, the New World is not only an object of European research but emerges as an autonomous subject taking part in a continental – if still asymmetrical – dialogue.

From the first day of his stay on the American continent the goal of Humboldt’s efforts was clear, namely to bring that which he had researched and known prior to his departure for far flung lands together with the experience and knowledge he would acquire in the course of his journey, the latter either being directly accessible or produced at the research venue itself. For Humboldt the decisive point – and this was clear from the very beginning of his travels in the western hemisphere – was to relate knowledge of wide and varied provenance. The “miracles” were no exception. For Humboldt, these were to be regarded only in an initial phase of investigation as individual phenomena; but then they were to be seen from the perspective of the “impression made by the whole of this powerful, sumptuous and yet so light, bright and mild world of plants” (Humboldt 1993: 42). The “exceptional” quality that strikes one at first glance is thus placed in relation to a whole and subsumed in a general order, within which the individual phenomena are simultaneously perceived and comprehended in their significance and function. Humboldt’s network-science aims at a total impression and can be understood as integral to a relational scientific practice that cuts across the most diverse knowledge and disciplines.

⁴ Also mentioned in this passage is the Spanish botanist Antonio José Cavanilles, who I will discuss later.

In no way was this accompanied by an obliteration of specific aspects of the various phenomena: Humboldt was not interested in blotting out the observed differences within the framework of the overall picture. In a letter as early as 16 July 1799 he attempted, in a first step, to distinguish clearly between investigative objects of European and American origin. Thus he emphasized not only the “magic” of the tropical nature he was experiencing for the first time, but also the fact that the two European researchers “since yesterday have not seen a single plant or animal product from Europe” (Humboldt 1993: 41). The observed object was always referred back to the observer; and his observational conditions, heritage, background knowledge, comparative frame of reference, and even his mood were taken into consideration.

Thus, as *Europeans* in Cumaná, Bonpland and Humboldt found themselves “in the most divine and fulsome land”: “wonderful plants, electric eels, tigers, armadilloes, monkeys, parrots and many, many half-wild Indians—a very beautiful and interesting race of people” (Humboldt 1993: 41). In this inventory of miracles – which “anticipates” some of the most important narrative elements of later Humboldtian travel reports even before the actual start of his sojourn – “half-wild Indians” appear as interesting research objects, so to speak, a part of nature. One should not be blind to the existence of certain residual colonial forms of expression in the early writings of Alexander von Humboldt. Yet one should also not overlook the fact that in his writings, e.g. *Vues des Cordillères*, not only the pre-Columbian advanced civilizations get a chance to speak, but Humboldt also attempts to locate contemporary Indian sections of the population in their diverse positions within the various colonial societies. Very early on he would find in the person of Carlos del Pino not only an Indian guide and sounding board who would accompany him on many of his travels through today’s Venezuela, but a man who was always prepared to discuss the plight of ethnically, culturally or socially marginalized groups and the prospects for integrating the various population segments in any future common social development.

In Humboldt’s letter of 16 July 1799 he focused not only on the black slaves but on the “copper Indians” who lived “outside the city” and thus on the margin of colonial Spanish society (Humboldt 1993: 42). Humboldt’s depiction of indigenous sections of the population is of course not free of ambivalence, given that his remarks are at times the hackneyed phrases of a European-colonial image of Indians. But one must not overlook the fact that at the same time he still always drew attention to the historical roots and political conditions of this image as well as the marginalization of indigenous sections of the population in America; that he investigated the cultural history of various Indian peoples in a very comprehensive way for his time; and that he castigated the barbarism of European civilization with respect to their crimes against both the Indian and black population.⁵ Humboldt’s thinking contains the tension of the modern era – the influx of colonial practices into modern Western science, while simultaneously sustaining a protest against a conception of modernity as solely concerned with Europe’s interests and population.

In this letter, the happiness and euphoria of the European scientists are doubtless connected with the sensory experience of another, non-European world, an experience that caused the French traveling companion, according to Humboldt, to “lose his mind”

⁵ See Ette (2002; particularly 183-96).

(Humboldt 1993: 42). Opening themselves to the researchers were enormous fields of activity related to these relatively unknown regions; the euphoria had to do with the “new”, what still had to be investigated. Thus was the New World – as a scientifically much less explored part of the planet in comparison with the Old World – seen as “new,” given that in the sphere of plant life alone there existed an inestimable number of un-researched flora. This is what sparked Humboldt’s euphoria, his feeling of happiness in the face of an entire world that remained to be “discovered” by the sciences. A wealth of knowledge that a “dislocation had shifted” into tangible nearness – it was this that triggered the condition of euphoria as consciously portrayed by Humboldt.

Thus did the New Continent – and particularly its tropical regions – become a place of euphoria-fueled science, always a *mobile* science in Humboldtian scientific practice. Just as Humboldt unceasingly took measurements and samples during his crossing from Tenerife in the Canary Islands to the coast of Cumaná – as if in a moveable laboratory, so as to include in his terrestrial and astronomical (and thus cosmic) investigations the ocean region traversed by the frigate “Pizarro” – so too in this first American letter to Wilhelm von Humboldt one finds mention of future trips to the Orinoco or to Cuba that mark out the rough course of Humboldt’s and Bonpland’s later actual journey. If during the first three days both researchers ran around like “fools” who could “determine nothing” scientifically because they were just grabbing randomly at objects and then tossing them aside for new ones, now this euphoric and uncontrolled helter skelter was to be transformed into an ordered, scientifically rigorous and measured movement. Of course such a mobile science makes fruitful the movement of the researchers in a double sense – as a movement within the region of the research objects and as an inner movement of the research subjects. Humboldt’s scientific practice in America was that of a euphoric science in the sense that amid all the measurements and investigations, all the references and comparisons, he never lost his capacity for wonder vis-à-vis his research objects.

A New World of/in Science

Two years after this first letter, in one dated 21 September 1801 that gave the writer’s exact longitude and latitude, Alexander – who in the meantime had arrived in Contreras near Ibagua – recounted to his brother Wilhelm the course of events hitherto as well as the results of his trip. In this interim report he injected a very personal observation:

I am extraordinarily happy, my health has never been better; my courage is unshakeable; my plans are succeeding; and wherever I go I am received with obliging courtesy. I have accustomed myself so well to the new world that surrounds me – to the tropical vegetation, the color of the sky, the placement of the stars, the sight of the Indians – that in my imagination Europe is sometimes only a country that I saw in my childhood. But in the meantime I yearn no less for it and hope to be back among you in autumn of 1804 (Humboldt 1993: 147).

The timewise very precise planning for his return to Europe would suggest that Humboldt and Bonpland’s expedition in its hermeneutic structure of movement can be inscribed in that circular structure which had been, so to speak, archetypally predetermined with the first voyage of Christopher Columbus. For both the Genoese and the Prussian, Europe was not only the starting point but the final destination of the entire

voyage, as for both of them the actual goal – the scientific, political and social fulfillment of the entire plan – could only be achieved and realized in Europe. Humboldt held on as steadfastly to this European homecoming and in particular to an envisioned return to the scientific capital of Paris as he did to his extensive and rigorous American travel plans, which formed the prerequisite for his mobile network science.

Nonetheless, this passage shows that in the asymmetrical tension between Europe and America, between eastern and western hemispheres, the Old World was in no way the only place of longing. For Alexander von Humboldt – twenty-six months after his letter from Cumaná and still previous to his climbing of Chimborazo and other great mountains in the American cordillera – America had become the scene of his happiness in the sense of a constant feeling of elation that went hand in hand with the necessary good fortune for the achievement of his plans. A sign of this happiness, according to Humboldt himself, was his exceeding salubrity, him feeling healthier than ever before.

For Humboldt the world of the American tropics was at the point of intersection between two different hemispheric constructions; in his thought and in his literary-scientific writings that means not only the eastern and western hemispheres but the northern and southern ones as well. In this sense, the voyage of one who was born – as he often emphasized – in the Halley's Comet year of 1769 was not only under a favorable star but under a whole starry firmament. That is what he says in the *Relation historique* about his crossing from the Old to the New World:

Since our entry into the hot zone we did not tire to admire every night the beauty of the southern sky in which, the further south we moved, more constellations rose before our eyes. A peculiar and hitherto unknown feeling emerges when in nearing the equator, and in the transition from one hemisphere to the other, one sees how the stars with which one has been familiar from earliest childhood sink more deeply and finally disappear. Nothing reminds the traveler in so lively a fashion of the enormous distance separating him from his homeland than the sight of a new sky (Humboldt 1991: 195 f.).

The “new dimension” of this World is invested with cosmic overtones, and once more the experience of it is associated not only with spatial distance from the homeland but with the abandonment of an old childhood world. As a joyful science, the Humboldtian Science always had an autobiographical element and delivered its aesthetic dimension through a (planned) dislocation, as impressively demonstrated in a literary fashion by the above passage in which the perspective moves from the eastern to the western, and from the northern to the southern hemispheres while contemplating the night sky. The spatial-temporal origin of the traveler is underscored but at the same time reinterpreted into the perspective of an observer for whom the constellations have changed: not only in a planetary but also in a cosmic sense is the world of the American tropics⁶ new for the European voyager.

⁶ Humboldt's tropocentric view – anchored in a double hemispheric system of coordinates that helped him to depict his New World surroundings – was clear from very early on in many other letters that would even refer to his own physical feelings from a tropocentric perspective. For example, in one letter dated 21 February 1801 and sent from Havana to his botanist friend Karl Ludwig Welldenow, Humboldt writes: “Despite the constant changes from dampness to heat to mountain chill, my health and

Humboldt's complex representation of the New World contains both a cosmic and a tellurian dimension, encompassing in vertical sequence the tropical plant world as well as the color of the sky and the constellations of the stars, the "sight of the Indians" and the "obliging courtesy" of all inhabitants of this continent toward the European traveler (Humboldt 1993: 147). In the face of all this, Europe receded further into a distance that was not only of a spatial but also of a temporal nature, and it went from being a continent to a "country" (Humboldt 1993: 147) from which both voyagers originated. As conveyed in the first volume of his *Relation historique* (1815) but first mentioned in a letter dated 21 September 1801, Humboldt's own "transformation" into a European would likewise be the result of a movement across space when he described the gleam of light "from a fisherman's hut in Sisarga" on Spain's Atlantic coast as "the last we discerned of the European coast" (Humboldt 1991: I, 65) and the last sign of "the coast of our homeland" (*pays natal*) (Humboldt 1993: 66). It was as a *European* that Alexander von Humboldt traveled the New World, yet he felt at home in this setting – a setting in which the Old World of his Prussian childhood became blurred.

But the New World was not so much *new* – as the dominant contemporary theories in the late nineteenth century would have it – because it was geologically younger and had arisen from the ocean at a later date so that its development and all life on it in relation to the Old World would have to be more recent. Rather, this world was new for Humboldt – and his use of the term "world" (as we will see) always intersected with cosmic, planetary and abstract philosophical meanings – because taking the place of a distant and far flung Old World was a euphoric motion encompassing both body and mind, symbolic of a *vita nova*: it stood for a new life attempting to unfold with total freedom of movement at the intersection of all hemispheres. But this new world that first emerged during Humboldt's trip was for him a *mundus novus* that extended from the plant world to the populace and their mores to the dome of the sky, it was *this* world he associated with happiness and (t)his happy life in general.

The extent to which such an apparently personal and subjective view was connected with the contemporary debates referring to the American continent – and thereby embedded in what Antonio Gerbi termed the *Disputa del Nuovo Mondo*⁷ – can be gauged in a letter of Alexander von Humboldt dated 22 April 1803 and written in Mexico to Antonio José Cavanilles, whose scientific publication Humboldt mentioned in the first letter I cited from 16 July 1799. In the 1803 letter, composed in Spanish, Humboldt related to the director of the Madrid botanical gardens not only some of the more strenuous stages of his journey, during which he and Bonpland were at all times in the pink of health ("nos hemos conservado siempre robustos" [Humboldt 1993: 225])⁸ but in this regard also drew the attention of the famous Spanish scientist to the popular prejudice of many Europeans:

Han exagerado muchos Europeos la influencia de estos climas en el espíritu, y afirmado que es imposible soportar aquí el trabajo intelectual; pero nosotros debemos publicar lo con-

happiness has... visibly improved since I left Spain. The tropical world is my element and I have never been so uninterruptedly healthy as in the last two years" (Humboldt 1993: 126).

⁷ See Antonello Gerbi (1983).

⁸ In view of the fact that Aimé Bonpland's health was cause for serious concern several times during the trip, use of the first-person plural can be understood as referring solely to Humboldt.

trario, y decir por experiencia propia que nunca nos hemos hallado con más fuerzas que al contemplar las bellezas y magnificencia con que se presenta aquí la naturaleza. Su grandeza, sus infinitas y nuevas producciones nos electrizaran, por decirlo así, nos llenaban de alegría, y hacían invulnerables. Así trabajábamos expuestos por tres horas al sol abrasador de Acapulco y de Guayaquil, sin experimentar incomodidad notable; así pisamos las nieves heladas de los Andes; y así corrimos con alegría los desiertos, los espesos bosques, la marina y sitios cenagosos (Humboldt 1993: 225 f.).

Here Humboldt takes an explicit and vehement position against those attempting to make a case for the inferiority of the New World based on the fallacy that the native climate was detrimental or even injurious to mental labor (*trabajo intelectual*). He points to years of scientific activity in America's most diverse climatic zones and landscapes in order to argue that his own experience (*experiencia propia*) of the salutary effects of this glorious natural world clearly refutes such prejudicial notions. From our present-day perspective, Humboldt's language – the beauties of the New World had literally electrified the travelers, filling them with joy and rendering their constitutions invulnerable – may well appear hyperbolic; but its aim was to forcefully counter the long-standing European project – against which Humboldt would battle unceasingly in subsequent decades – of portraying America as inferior by calling up his own experiences in the equatorial region of the new continent. For contact with the New World had indeed electrified Humboldt and excited him to a degree visible not only in his correspondence and journals, in his often risky excursions and unflagging investigations, but also in his many publications. For Humboldt, his travels from 1799 to 1804 (and recorded in *Reise in die Äquinoktial-Gegenden des Neuen Kontinents*) marked not only a new chapter in his life but opened a *vita nova*, a new life, which was intimately connected to the New World in terms of science and with regard to his euphoric relationship to knowledge.

***Mundus Novus* and Hemispheric Wholeness**

We can only understand the semantic intensity and epistemological complexity of Humboldt's new and historiographically founded discourse on the New World when we take into account his travel experience and the related emergence of a certain life-knowledge that he attempted to impart to his readership through the use of numerous narrative, i.e. literary, devices. Whether Humboldt approached the American continent from the perspective of oceanography or climatology, geology or geomorphology, plant geography or anthropology, pre-Columbian or cultural history, historiography or politics, literature or art history: it was always undertaken within the context of a decades-long, trans-disciplinary, passionate and very conscious attempt to raise America to an equal status with Europe in the world's future multipolar development. Of course this implied that Alexander von Humboldt would always perceive the American continent, in all its diversity, as a hemispheric unity. To underscore this unity – which, for Humboldt, always meant great multiplicity – he tended to prefer the term “New Continent” (*nouveau continent*) to that of “New World” in his writings.

In his *Examen critique* (composed in French and published in five volumes between 1836 and 1839, a work that still contains insights for us today), Humboldt put forward the view that neither Christopher Columbus nor Amerigo Vespucci “ever har-

bored the thought that they had discovered a new continent” (Humboldt 1852: 130)⁹: “Both were equally persuaded, to their dying day, that they had landed at various points on the continent of Asia... as evidenced unambiguously in their reports” (Humboldt 1852: 130-132).¹⁰

If Columbus was firmly convinced that he had in fact realized his plan of reaching the spices and other goods in the rich parts of Asia by the western route, the facts in the case of Amerigo Vespucci – who, in contrast to the Genoan seafarer, was not the focus of Humboldt’s *Examen critique* – are much more complex and even contradictory. For in his famous letter of 1503 to Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de Medici – a letter which rapidly went through many copies and translations – the Florentine Vespucci indeed speaks of discovering a *mundus novus*, which he then proceeds to describe:

In the last few days I have given you a thorough report of my return trip from these new regions [*ab novis illis regionibus*] which we discovered and explored with the fleet that was financed and commissioned by His Most Serene Majesty and King of Portugal (whence I write you now) and which one could designate as a new world [*novum mundum appellare licet*] of which the ancients had no knowledge and whose existence is completely new [*novissima res*] for all who hear of it. For this [new world] far exceeds the ideas of our ancients [*opinionem nostrorum antiquorum excedit*] insofar as the majority of them judged there to be no mainland at all south of the equator but only the ocean, which they called the Atlantic; and even if some few asserted that there was mainland to be found there, they argued in numerous ways that this land was uninhabitable. But my last sea voyage proved that this notion of theirs does not at all correspond to the truth, as in those southern latitudes I came upon a continent that was more densely populated with peoples and animals than our Europe or Asia or Africa, and which, moreover, possesses a climate more temperate and pleasing than that of any other known region of the world, as you will hear in due course of my narrative. In all brevity, I will commit to paper the main events and all things worthy of mention that I saw or heard in this new world [*in hoc novo mundo*] (Vespucci 2002: 13).¹¹

However one may judge the authenticity of the few letters and writings that have putatively come down to us from Amerigo Vespucci, one thing remains incontestable: with the above-quoted letter, Vespucci asserted the existence of a *mundus novus* and thus brought it into discourse. Of little concern to us here are the well-known errors and misunderstandings of the young geographer and cartographer Martin Waldseemüller when he proposed the first name of the Florentine traveler as the name for this discursive product, this “new continent,” and used it in the world map of his *Cosmographiae universalis introductio* (1507). Unmistakeable is the fact that Vespucci labeled the “new regions” and the “new world” as “new” because occidental antiquity had no notion and no idea of such a continent. Consequently, in the cited passage, this *mundus novus* was termed “new” insofar as it had not been a component aspect of Western knowledge; from a

⁹ It is high time that this important and – even for contemporary readers – insightful work once again be made available to a larger public.

¹⁰ And he added: “In this respect the date of 1497 employed by Vespucci in the published letters from his first voyage was of absolutely no significance when seen from the perspective of those terms customarily used in the early sixteenth century” (Humboldt 1852: 132).

¹¹ Here also are the Latin quotations.

European perspective, in comparison to other areas of the world that were already known to the Occident, the attribute *novus* was legitimate.

The discursive rift between “Old” and “New” World thus stands in no direct relation to Columbus’ plan – for primarily economic and geo-strategic reasons, but also political and theological Christian ones – to reach India, China and Marco Polo’s Cipango by a western route; but it is closely connected with Europe’s colonial expansion and thus with the first phase of accelerated globalization. Alexander von Humboldt’s decades-long examination of this – in his opinion – momentous phase in human development culminated in his *Examen Critique* (translated into German as *Kritische Untersuchungen über die historische Entwicklung der geographischen Kenntnisse von der Neuen Welt* [Critical Inquiries into the Historical Development of Geographic Knowledge of the New World]). Already from the first sentence of his “Foreword,” dated “Berlin, November 1833” (Humboldt 1852: I, 19), this process is depicted from a comprehensive historical perspective as a systematic world-historical development: “Those centuries in which the hallmarks of lively intellectual striving are apparent, display to the observer the decisive character of an irrevocable movement toward premeditated goals” (Humboldt 1852: I, 6).

In this respect, the fifteenth century – which played a central role in Humboldt’s investigation – was a crucial watershed not only for occidental countries but for continued historical development, which in the second half of the eighteenth century led to a second phase of accelerated globalization whose array of problems Humboldt’s entire work on America proposed to answer:

In the middle, between two wholly different levels of development, we have so to speak of an intermediate world that belongs simultaneously to the Middle Ages and the modern era. The fifteenth century was the age of striking discoveries on this planet of new routes that connected peoples in all degrees of latitude and longitude and described the earth in a natural, unbiased way (Humboldt 1852: I, 6).

This “intermediate world” of the fifteenth century with its discoveries, its newly opened routes, and its more precise mapping of the earth was of course integrated by Humboldt into a more extensive development within which the “state of our European civilization” was traced back to “Greece as the starting point” (Humboldt 1852: I, 47). In this way the *Examen critique* can be understood as a scrupulous inquiry into Western expansion that Alexander von Humboldt undertook in the second volume of his *Kosmos*, using the term *Weltbewußtsein* (world consciousness), which emerged from the specific land-sea distribution of the eastern Mediterranean and the increasing – if not always steadily so – links between peoples and cultures (Humboldt 1845-1862).¹² It was within the context of this occidental development that Humboldt embedded his own project – his own voyage – which, no less than the voyages of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was a methodical enterprise where little was left to chance – although never completely free of it:

The great discoveries in the western hemisphere were not beholden to chance. It would be unfair to ascribe – as posterity is inclined to do – the initial seed [of these discoveries] to

¹² Citation from Humboldt (1845-1862: II, 154); see also Ette (2002: 92-101).

certain instinctive mental dispositions, whereas they were in fact the fruit of genius and protracted reflection (Humboldt 1852: I, 31).

With the notion of a western hemisphere, Alexander von Humboldt focused on this region of the planet, bypassing other areas that were to be spheres of deployment for European expansionism, personally traveling through the Caribbean – both islands and the mainland rim – and through parts of South America (from present-day Venezuela to Columbia to Ecuador to Peru) and North America (Mexico and the United States).

Even if the many voyages of exploration in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were quite deliberate enterprises, Humboldt knew better than any other of his contemporaries the high degree to which the names given the various regions of the western hemisphere were owing to chance and all kinds of misunderstanding (and, we might add, still retain those adventitious names to this day). On the basis of numerous historical as well as contemporary documents, Humboldt traced the origins of other place-names, and constantly stressed how precarious these European christenings were from the very outset:

Incidentally, the story behind the name of the Antilles Islands is similar to that of America; the former, as we have seen, was proposed by Anghiera in 1493, while the latter was forwarded by Ylacomylus [i.e. Waldseemüller], and in both cases it was more than a century before their usage would be general. Christopher Columbus never grouped the total mass of the *Islands of India* under a single name... On the maps of Juan de la Cosa and Ribero there is nothing that goes by the name of Antilles (Humboldt 1852: I; 428).

Without yielding here to the enthusiasm of Alexander von Humboldt, who subsequently listed and discussed an impressive number of terms for the area of the Antilles (or rather the Caribbean) we should at least note that the Prussian scholar was concerned with comprehending and depicting the western hemisphere as both a whole and in its manifold variety. This held not only for the period after the so-called “discovery” but also for the pre-Columbian era in which there existed a differentiation in the natural realm that had its equal in the cultural and linguistic spheres: Thus, from the very beginning of his *Ansichten der Kordilleren und Monumente der eingeborenen Völker Amerikas* (Views of the Cordillera and Monuments of the Native Peoples of America), Humboldt maintained:

The American race, in terms of numbers the smallest of all, still inhabits the largest area of the globe. It is spread over both hemispheres, from 68 degrees of latitude in the north to 55 degrees of latitude in the south. It is the only race which has settled both in the hot coastal plains and in the mountains at an altitude that surpasses the Pic of Teneriffa by two hundred toisen.

The number of languages which distinguish the many native tribes from one another appear to be greater on the new continent than in Africa, where there are over 140 according to the latest research of Mssrs. Seetzen and Vater... Even if they are not all of common origin, this uniformity of idioms bespeaks a striking analogy in the mental disposition of American peoples from Greenland to the Magellan Straits (Humboldt 1989: viii-x).

The diversity of languages which spanned the continent and the indigenous groupings that as a whole remained relatively isolated from one another – these show to what

degree America, extending across both the southern and northern hemispheres, was for Humboldt a continent of exceeding heterogeneity whose common features could at the same time only be an object of scientific inquiry from a unified view of the hemisphere. In Humboldt's view the events succeeding the *conquista* still further strengthened (as we saw) the fundamental heterogeneity to be found throughout the history of the continent. Therewith arises the question as to which discursive and conceptual structures and models Alexander von Humboldt employed to form his particular understanding of the "New World."

The concept of *Welt* and Plurality

The semantic inquiry into concepts of "Welt" can be divided into at least three different levels and contexts of meaning. Thus do conceptual constructs such as *Weltraum* (outer space) or *Weltall* (universe) – which in the seventeenth century was developed as a replacement for the Latin word *universum* – have a galactic or cosmic meaning; one should also not forget that the lexeme *Welt* was taken up in Old High German as **uueralt*¹³ and **wera* (man, human).¹⁴ Etymologically speaking, at least, this means that the concept of *Welt* has a human content, and one can see various *Welt* compounds from very early on in the history of the German language.

Apart from this first isotopy, going far beyond the confines of planet earth, one can discern a second level of meaning of global, planetary significance that we are able to trace with such terms as *Weltgesellschaft* (world society), *Welthandel* (world trade), *Weltverkehr* (world transport), *Weltgeschichte* (world history), *Weltgemeinschaft* (world community), and *Weltliteratur* (world literature). One can easily show through numerous examples how semantic restrictions can come into effect in the sense of a limitation to certain specific (occidental) historical developments, state actors or (alphabetical writing) cultures. At the same time, this globally defined meaning can just as easily be given a qualitative inflection, as seen in Goethe's coining of the term *Weltliteratur*, which still has the same implicit meaning today.

Apart from the cosmic and planetary isotopy, however, there exists yet a third less concrete usage of the lexeme "world," as can be seen in the very philosophical term *Weltanschauung*, which is one of the most popular of the *Welt* compounds to the present day. The development of a cosmic or global understanding of space is not inherent in this concept. Of course a spatial understanding can do no harm in philosophy, but a *Weltanschauung* does not necessarily rest on an empirically funded *Welterfahrung* (world experience) or *Weltkenntnis* (world knowledge), but rather in the Western tradition is all too frequently abstracted from the concrete time-space dimension as well as the cultural, political and social prerequisites of one's own "view" or "vision".

Characteristic of Alexander von Humboldt's numerous world concepts is that in his usage the cosmic, planetary and abstract levels of meaning overlap and conjoin with one

¹³ See Hermann Braun's entry "Welt" (Braun 1997: 444). Braun notes, however, that this word was, "from the very beginning, colored by the Christian tradition."

¹⁴ See Kluge (1999: 885).

another. So, for example, his concept of *Weltbewusstsein* (world consciousness) has a cosmic dimension spanning all things in heaven and earth, but at the same time – and without neglecting the abstract level of meaning that derives from spatio-temporal contexts – signifies an expansive process of planetary “penetration”. Humboldt’s world concepts are simultaneously empirically founded and imply a self-reflexive experiential science. In contrast to the dominant philosophical currents of the early nineteenth century, e.g. the Hegelian school, with Humboldt the concept of *Weltanschauung* is always grounded in a concrete and testable view of the world. And because he quite consciously sought to link the various levels of meaning with one another, he indignantly rejected the subtitle *Erdbeschreibung* (earth description) – as he employed it in the passage already quoted from his *Examen critique* – for his *Kosmos*, the summa of his life’s work in science, instead deciding on *Weltbeschreibung* (world description), which in no way limited itself merely to the second or planetary isotopy.¹⁵

One can certainly maintain that the actual achievement of the concept *Welt* lies less on the logical-conceptual plane than on the ideational-imaginative one (Braun 1997: 334). Yet Humboldt’s concern was not least the semantics of the world concept, which always aimed at wholeness and implied an experience of totality, even if this – as in the turn of phrase “New World” – only referred to a part of the planet. For Humboldt, the world had a human content and the human, in its turn, was always a world-shaping force. Doubtless Humboldt’s world concepts were embedded within a historical phase where the theological frame of reference was fading and in which *Welt* semantics had once played a more significant role (Braun 1997: 439). But in Humboldt’s case there was by no means a semantic reduction to the earthly and the profane anthropological level; rather, he undertook the illuminating project of creating a new complexity for the *Welt* concept.

Part of this complexity was the plurality of worlds, a plurality that was always about the difference of manifold forms, the unity of affiliates, and the existence of *one* world among the diversity. It is precisely this multi-layered, pluralistic semantics that is implicit in Alexander von Humboldt’s utilization of the term “New World,” a polysemy in which – as we have already witnessed – the autobiographical dimension of his own experience of the world cannot be neglected.

A Hemispherical Science

The specificity and distinction of the “New World” was on the one hand rooted in to its geological, topographical and general natural diversity, and on the other to the related cultural and (world-)historical conditions. It was precisely in Humboldt’s frequently used term *the “New Continent”* that the etymological “connectedness” of those various parts appeared and, as it were, provided for an internal differentiation of the natural

¹⁵ See his letter of 27 October 1834 to Varnhagen von Ense: “I wanted to add the word ‘cosmos,’ indeed to force mankind to name the book such in order to prevent one from saying H.’s physical earth description, which would thus reduce the thing to the class of something by Mittersacher. World description (formed according to world history), as an unconventional word, would always be confused with earth description” (as cited in Humboldt 1860: 22).

realm. In contrast to Asia, Africa and Europe, which as continents of the “Old World” were linked with each other through land bridges and were thus in a sense connected, the “New Continent” in Humboldt’s day was distinguished by its self-contained quality – by its relative “insularity” – which at all times worked as an important factor in the natural and cultural spheres. The “New Continent” was *continens* only insofar as its various sub-continental parts formed a common land mass for which only in the course of the sixteenth century a *shared* name emerged that would emphasize the link.

Married to the resulting internal structure in the natural sphere was a differentiation in the cultural realm that was fed by the prehistorical migrations of those population groups from the northwest later designated as “Indian,” and by those expeditions from the east undertaken by European soldiers and settlers in order to explore, conquer and colonize the land. This was underscored by Humboldt in his *Examen critique*:

...[R]ather I wish to direct the reader’s attention to the peculiar character of the diverse regions of America, these distinguished by various degrees of barbarism and more or less advanced civilization at the time of the first settlement of Spanish, Portuguese and English colonies... Politically speaking, in those regions aface Europe, the natives make no claims on our attention... This is not the case with the mountain dwellers of the Andes and inhabitants of the coastal region, areas lying directly opposite Asia, the focus of mankind’s oldest civilization (Humboldt 1852: I, 377).

For these and other reasons already cited, diverse natural and above all cultural factors composed the complex picture (contrasting various parts of the hemisphere) that colored Humboldt’s discourse on America. So as to grasp the “inextinguishable character” which “has impressed itself on the various parts of an independent America even to the present day,” one had to clearly delineate between “hunting peoples” and “agricultural nations” that “manifest antiquarian political institutions and a highly developed indigenous legislature” (Humboldt 1852: I, 379).

Using the complexity of his mediating position between text and image as well as through the dynamic relatedness existing among the various text fragments, Humboldt devoted a multiform work – still impressive today – to the diverse developments of indigenous cultures. It appeared between 1810 and 1813 with the title *Vues des Cordillères et Monumens des Peuples Indigènes de l’Amérique* and this mighty oeuvre presented chapters such as “Views of Culture.”¹⁶ Without here entering into detail regarding this “birth certificate” of pre-Columbian American Studies (appearing in a German edition for the first time ever last year¹⁷), with respect to the passage cited above one should note that Humboldt developed a hemispheric relationality embracing the entire continent, thus allowing him to compare extremely diverse cultural developments on a continental scale. Besides this notion of separate western and eastern hemispheres, Humboldt also distinguished between a southern and northern hemisphere, thus presenting him with – as we saw with regard to the high standing in which he held the tropics – a double-hemispheric system of coordinates. Thus, alongside an internal relatedness comprising the

¹⁶ See Ette (forthcoming).

¹⁷ See Humboldt (2004).

entire American continent, an external relatedness could emerge whereby American phenomena might be linked on a global scale with phenomena from the most diverse regions of our planet. This doubled-up, internal and external network created the basis for a hemispheric perspective that made the American continent its focus without running the danger of viewing it in isolation from world-wide developments.

So it only followed that Humboldt's hemispheric view in the cultural realm would in no way limit itself to the pre-Columbian cultures or to the recording of those diverse cultural conditions with which the European conquistadors and settlers were confronted in the "New World." At the very beginning of the twenty-sixth chapter in the third volume of Humboldt's *Relation historique* (appearing between November 1814 and April 1831) one finds a long passage that allows us a chronologically altered view of the hemispheric constructions of the Prussian scholar. We read there:

Since I last described the immeasurable aid the peoples of the twin Americas [*peuples des deux Amériques*] would have in view (due to their location and their trade with Europe and Asia) as soon as they were able to enjoy the blessings of reasonable liberty, one of those great upheavals has taken place which from time to time will rouse mankind and which in this case has transformed the social conditions of those great lands through which I traveled. One can assert that presently three peoples of European extraction inhabit the mainland of the New World (*Nouveau-Monde*). One of these, and the most powerful, is the Germanic race; while the other two, linguistically and from the standpoint of literature and manners and mores, trace their descent to Latin Europe. Those parts of the old world [*ancien monde*] that project furthest west – the Iberian peninsula and the British Isles – are also those whose colonies have the greatest expanse; but a four-thousand mile long coastal area populated only by descendants of Spain and Portugal bears witness to the extent to which the peoples of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Iberia, through their maritime exploits, soared far above the other seafaring nations. The wide dissemination of their languages from California to the Rio de la Plata, from the slopes of the cordilleres to the jungles of the Amazon River, is a monument to national glory that will outlive all political revolutions (Humboldt 1991: II, 1461 f.).¹⁸

In this exposition, Humboldt's focus – against the backdrop of historical developments *de longue durée* – is on recent political and cultural developments. Since publication of the first volume of Humboldt's *Relation historique*, the political movement for independence – "*Independencia*" – in Spain's American colonies had overcome all kinds of obstacles so as to make possible a new phase of social development. Within this context, the peoples of "the twin Americas" were documented in their differences and at the same time in their totality, whereby it is highly revealing that neither the geographical distinction between South America and North America (as a border between the two, Humboldt usually specified the isthmus of Panama, Central America thus being added to the North American subcontinent) nor the astronomical distinction between the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere corresponds to the prevailing ethnic-cultural distinctions usually drawn between peoples of Germanic and Latin heritage.

Humboldt's interpolated discussion of two Americas was remarkable insofar as his designation of the residents of America as peoples of *Europe latine*, as it were, anticipat-

¹⁸ The French phrases in brackets are from the original.

ed the term Latin America (*Amérique latine*), which only established itself later, in the mid-nineteenth century. The internal differentiation was initially introduced as a bipartite division and not only were further distinctions made because of those parts of America where Latin Europe left its imprint via the Spanish and Portuguese – and in due course the French – who conquered and colonized and divided this land, but because several lines later Humboldt mentions – along with the less important Dutch and Danish possessions – two further peoples “who could exert influence on the destiny of the other hemisphere (*l’autre hémisphère*)”: “on the one hand, those of Slavic descent¹⁹ who are attempting to build settlements from the Alaskan peninsula to California, and on the other hand the free Africans of Haiti who have realized what the Milanese traveler Benzone first predicted in 1545” (Humboldt 1991: I, 1462).

In addition to the highly differentiated view of Indian America and the regions of Germanic, Latin and Slavic influence, now, against the background of the successful Haitian Revolution of 1804, we have the former slaves of the previously French sugar colony of Saint-Dominique serving as a future historical and world-shaping power in America. This is illustrative of something that can be observed quite frequently in Humboldt’s writing: out of the initially crystal-clear organizational principles emerge additional distinctions which do not fit into the previously sketched lines of demarcation, but are superimposed and overlaid in ever more complex ways.

Hardly has this occurred, however, when Humboldt will widen the perspective yet further and present – after a short consideration of future positive prospects for development of the population on the New Continent – the picture of an America within a growing global society that for the peoples of both worlds will doubtless be of multi-polar caliber:

Certainly, in the wake of the great upheavals that human societies are now undergoing, the entire capital and common heritage of civilization will be divided unequally among the peoples of both worlds; but slowly the equilibrium will be reinstated and it is a pernicious and, I daresay, a godless prejudice to think that it spells disaster for old Europe if on some other part of our planet the public welfare makes headway and thrives. The independence of the colonies will not lead to their isolation but rather bring the peoples of old cultures closer together (Humboldt 1991: 1465).

¹⁹ Humboldt’s taking into account the Slavic settlers on the west coast of America was part of a system that can be compared to Germaine de Staël’s famous division of Europe in her “Observations générale” at the beginning of her *De l’Allemagne*: “On peut rapporter l’origine des principales nations de l’Europe à trois grandes races différentes: la race latine, la race germanique, et la race esclavonne. Les Italiens, les Français, les Espagnols ont reçu des Romains leur civilisation et leur langage; les Allemands, les Suisses, les Anglais, les Suédois, les Danois et les Hollandais sont des peuples teutoniques; enfin, parmi les Esclavons, les Polonais et les Russes occupent le premier rang. Les nations dont la culture intellectuelle est d’origine latine sont plus anciennement civilisées que les autres; elles ont pour la plupart hérité de l’habile sagacité des Romains dans le maniement des affaires de ce monde” (de Staël 1968: 45). This passage sheds light not only on relations to other continental schema of the time, particularly among the French-speaking peoples, but it also illuminates the cultural concept – linked as it is with the semantics of *civilization* – of *race*.

Contradictions and Flaws in the Weave

In his “Introduction” to *Reise in die Äquinoktial-Gegenden des Neuen Kontinents*, dated “Paris, February 1812” (Humboldt 1991: I, 40), Alexander von Humboldt – while also including the subject matter expected in travel reports by the contemporary public – drew a clear line of demarcation between the hemispheres, between the “Old” and “New” worlds:

I am more than aware of how a traveler through America is at a disadvantage with respect to those who describe Greece, Egypt, the banks of the Euphrates or the South Sea islands. In the old world it is the civilized peoples and the gradations of their civilization that lend the picture its principal character; in the peoples of the new world, by contrast, the individual vanishes, as it were, together with his problems amidst a wild and colossal nature. The human race offers here only a few relics of indigenous hordes that are little advanced culturally or of that uniformity of mores and institutions that have been planted by European colonists on these distant shores (Humboldt 1991: I, 35 f.).

The sharp contrast between a world of culture and a world of nature opened, as it were, a travel movement that the reading public would follow for almost two decades until publication of the third and final volume in April 1831. A short time later, in April 1813, and likewise in Paris, Humboldt composed his “Introduction” to *Ansichten der Kordilleren* and – despite many contradictions – would place the lodestar of the world’s cultures in ancient Greece. But it was precisely in this book that Humboldt presented his readership with a wealth of evidence pertaining to how diverse were these “monuments of the native peoples of America,” which the Prussian scholar scrupulously investigated en route through the most variegated regions of America as well as the libraries and archives of both the Old and New Worlds.

What could have moved Humboldt to hold two essentially opposing views in two separate introductions to volumes appearing within a year of one another and each depicting important components of his American travel account? Whereas in his travel account he resorted to the bromide of the American continent as a “realm of nature” which, apart from Europeans and creoles, was inhabited solely by “the remnant of indigenous hordes that were little culturally advanced” (Humboldt 1991: 35 f.), in his *Ansichten der Kordilleren* he vehemently attacked the widely-held prejudice that America was a continent bereft of culture and history before its “discovering”:

A people whose festivals were arranged according to the stars and whose calendar was engraved in a public monument probably had a higher level of civilization than it is granted by those clever historians who have taken America as their subject. These authors perceived as barbaric such human condition as was remote from a type of culture formed in accordance with certain systematic ideas they had. These sharp distinctions between barbaric and civilized nations are unacceptable (Humboldt 1989: 194).

The contradictions between both passages are startling, but they are doubtlessly due to the fact that in the introduction to his travel account Alexander von Humboldt first employed a common cliché and then in the further course of his *Relation historique* proposed a much more complex portrait of the continent. Therefore, one may well question

the strict contrasts between the two worlds in Humboldt's thought at the beginning of the travel account, especially since in the above description a not uncharacteristic "flaw in the weave" has crept into Humboldt's systematic list. For the supposedly clear organization has been thoroughly and mysteriously disordered by the addition of the anything but old-world South Sea Islands, which were made famous through the travel accounts of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, Georg Forster and James Cook. It is with the aid of these small and seemingly illogical deviations – these supposedly trivial flaws in the weave – that Humboldt succeeds in avoiding the rigid schematic quality that he disparaged in the "systematic ideas" (Humboldt 1989: 194) of a Raynal, de Pauw, or Robertson. For not only in *Vues des Cordillères* but also in *Relation historique* was Humboldt able to show himself capable of depicting Old and New Worlds not in terms of their contrasts but in terms of their complementary qualities and interdependence. And in support of this he knew – in an impressive fashion almost unrivaled among his contemporaries – how to adduce cultural evidence that went beyond the transitory traces of hunting peoples and other nomadic tribes and show the highest flower of indigenous culture.

Similar contradictions are to be found at other levels. What Humboldt in the first volume of his travel account denounced as "uniformity" and then in his third volume – with reference to the sweeping dissemination of Spanish – praised as a deathless "monument to national glory" (Humboldt 1991: II, 1462), was portrayed in other writings as an important element in easing communication across national lines and something that would soon aid the future development of the Spanish-speaking world. Already in his American travel journal he had noted that among all the European languages outside of Europe it was Spanish that was "spoken by the largest number of people" (Humboldt 1986: I, 75). Even Arabic or Chinese were not "spread out over such an enormous area as from Nueva Galicia and California to Cape Horn, the Philippines and the Moluccan Islands"; and if one included Portuguese, which was closer to Castilian than to Catalan or Valencian then one could "comprise within the territory of the Spanish language all of eastern India, Persia and the Asian archipelagoes in which Portuguese functions as a language of business and trade" (Humboldt 1986: I, 75). The only language that came close to Spanish was English, which for its part was spread over "the larger section of North America and the West Indies, Bengal and Orissa, the coast of Madras" (Humboldt 1986: I, 75). But with changed political conditions, it was Spanish whose developmental possibilities held greatest promise:

If the Spanish nation one day obtains political freedom and intellectual education, this dissemination of the nation's language will give a great advantage first and foremost to Europeans. This will be particularly conspicuous in South America. That which is printed in Mexico can be read in Caracas, Lima, Buenos Aires and Manila. What ease in the spread of ideas and sensibilities! (Humboldt 1986: I, 75).

In this journal entry – made during Humboldt's trip to Bogotá along the Río Magdalena – he conjured up the worldwide dissemination of those European languages spoken on the New Continent, this "mapping" of a language atlas on the one hand emphasizing the differences between North and South America – and thus between the "two Americas" – while at the same time exceeding the hemispheric boundaries by far. It was characteristic of Humboldt's thought and writing style that even his listing of regions and

capitals of South America was in no way consistent and ran counter to general logic. For one, in no respect was Mexico geographically a subcontinent of South America – not even in the sense of Humboldtian organizing principles; and neither was Manila, which, like the South Sea Islands in Humboldt’s listing of regions of the “Old World,” lay beyond the borders of South America and the entire American continent. We encounter flaws in the weave here as well.

The frequent inconsistency of Humboldt’s listings may at first glance appear as mere slips. The repeated nature of such “oversights” should of course make us sensitive to the fact that Humboldt’s concern was quite obviously to transcend rigidly systematic ideas and simplistic classifications so as to empower new and protean perspectives. For the only valid system for Humboldt was the crossing and blurring of boundaries: in his writings, new relations and connections are always appearing, concepts and perspectives are constantly changing, and the inclusion of other phenomena are forever disclosing new affinities that were not at first apparent. Thus emerges a varied perspective and concomitant suppleness of mind, which, through endless shifts and overlaps among various spheres, focuses not on divisions and appertaining territories but rather on the relations between individual regions and their accompanying potential for communication and exchange. In this way the internal relationality on the hemispheric level can be brought out in all its complexity while still applying to the American hemisphere an external relatedness that transcends American frontiers, as Humboldt showed in his example of languages as a means of communication *par excellence*.²⁰

A Transareal Science²¹

This multiplication of perspectives and the related increase in referential systems intensifies a hemispheric understanding precisely because it issues from transareal and transcontinental relations that transcend the American hemisphere. We can therefore speak of a hemispheric underpinning of a transareal science of America. Alexander von Humboldt was less concerned with territories and conditions than he was with relations, methods and dynamics. Characteristic of his thought is a remark at the beginning of the “First Section” of his *Examen Critique*, in which he reflects “On the Causes Leading to Discovery of the New World”:

Everything that stimulates movement, whatever that motivating force might be – whether mistakes, vague conjectures, instinctive feelings, fact-based conclusions – this broadens the spectrum of ideas and leads to discovery of new ways of empowering human intelligence (Humboldt 1852: I, 34).

We have seen that it was not only in the history of European expansion and discovery that Humboldt placed dynamic processes in the foreground. The key concept to his entire

²⁰ For the regional-geographic, temporal, social, literary, genre-specific, intermediary and cultural dimensions of this new discourse on America, see Ette (forthcoming).

²¹ For a definition of transcontinental, transareal, transnational, transregional and translocal relationships, see the introduction in Ette (2005).

thinking was movement linked to vital, open structures. With his affinity for dynamic processes, he developed a transregional and transareal science that, through a multi-perspective approach, opened the store of regional scientific knowledge to worldwide relations without sacrificing a region's specificity or its global or general development.

Thus did the new empirical-experiential American discourse of Alexander von Humboldt distinguish itself in that he neither isolated nor fixed the diverse phenomena and investigative objects in their "Americanness," nor were these dissolved in the general or the global. Treading a fine line between an unvarying difference and a leveling dedifferentiation, Humboldt developed methods in the area of scientific epistemology as well as in his literary-aesthetic mode of description allowing for the emergence of structures from his tangled skein of relationships that were relational and at the same time mobile and dynamic.

So, for example, it is no surprise when Humboldt, in his *Vue des Cordillères*, places the Aztec calendar stone (plate XXIII) in relation to Egyptian, Tartar, Western-Antiquarian, Tibetan and Japanese notions of time and time cycles. But the comparison was never made for its own sake, nor did it lead to schematic or mechanical thought incapable of focusing its attention on the various investigative objects. Rather, Alexander von Humboldt attempted – from his European vantage point and based on his continually updated research – to include not only Western and non-Western phenomena in a dialogue that took into account global, transcontinental, transareal, transnational, transregional and translocal dynamics, but also to stimulate a dialogue whose subject was constituted solely of non-Western phenomena. In this way, by means of the widely diverse calendar systems, we learn not only about the relativity of ideas of time; we are able to simultaneously comprehend how in Humboldt's *Ansichten des Cordillères* – which, at the descriptive level, is certainly the most daring and radical book of this inveterate America traveler – it is wholly impossible to avoid disjunctures and rifts and a feeling of discontinuity and heterogeneity. For the dynamics of TransArea relations on a wide variety of levels and with regard to widely varying phenomena cannot be conceived as continuous developments; rather, they are permeated by processes of hybridization and rifts of every sort. Humboldt's highly fragmented writing style and the intermediary networking of information transform the reading experience into an elastic one that ceaselessly jumps from one section of text to another and which no longer follows any itinerary or, for that matter, senses any geographic, chronological, historic or thematic continuity.

From a transareal standpoint, the dislocation of knowledge is inscribed in any development in America irrespective of whether – with regard to the American hemisphere – we foreground the internal or the external relational quality, which is in no sense always mediated by Europe. Thus, a transareal and transregional science can be understood as the consideration of a given region – for example, the New Continent – as a multi-layered linkage of past, present and future movements. In other words, the American hemisphere appears as a network of dislocations that are traced in their transareal and translocal connections. Both within and without the continent, these form highly diverse areas and zones whose borders overlap and intersect in all kinds of ways.

With the assistance of his transdisciplinary procedural method, Alexander von Humboldt persuasively integrated into his hemispheric constructions of America this transareal and transregional principle in research on the American hemispheres and in inquiries into external and internal relational networks. In Humboldt's thinking and writing the

cultural sphere was always accompanied by the natural realm, and along with the new boundaries the various old dividing lines were also still discernible – thus allowing for various inchoate border regions that determined the sometimes opposed but at other times complementary structures of the pre-Columbian and colonial worlds as well as developments of his own time. Humboldt's were not regional studies of whatever kind but a relational understanding of dynamic worldwide phenomena that comprised complex interactions, homologies and analogies between various cultures: a science of networking that focuses its attention particularly on movements and mutations.

At the beginning of this examination we became acquainted with the effects and consequences of the dislocation and movement of our two European researchers in America and the production of a euphoric and invigorating scientific practice that stemmed from it. This dislocation was of course transmitted by Alexander von Humboldt to his reading public insofar as his descriptions of native phenomena in the New World often produced entirely surprising relations to comparable global phenomena. This process of bold comparison practiced by Humboldt in diverse forms allowed him – for instance, in his discussion of the population growth of Indian villages in New Spain – to draw a comparison with West Prussian peasant villages (Humboldt 1811: 338). The reading public was given a comparison between its “own” and “foreign” phenomena, so that the former appeared in a wholly unaccustomed and, as it were, dislocated context. In a similar fashion – and one could cite many more examples – the initially surprising comparison between slavery in the New World and peasant serfdom in the Old World effectuates a new perspective on the familiar, a perspective that contributes to a subversion of the clear boundaries between one's “own” and “foreign” phenomena. From a transareal and transregional vantage point and in their complex dynamic, the investigated phenomena offer multi-level perspectives.

The technique of dislocating knowledge consequently leads to surprising effects that – through the experience of wonder and amazement – produces new perspectives on one's “own” phenomena, which suddenly appear in a new and unaccustomed light. With justice one could here draw a comparison with the literary process of the alienation effect or with the de-automatization of perceptual habits. Thus – to mention just one further instance – the appearance of the Rhine Falls at Schaffhausen in the midst of a description of the Tequendama Falls in Humboldt's travel journal makes clear a characteristic function of the thought processes of the Prussian voyager (Humboldt 1986: I, 113), and one that goes far beyond a simple attempt to surprise. One's “own” phenomena are linked up universally within the framework of a globalizing science and enable a novel understanding of supposedly well-known phenomena that in a transcontinental as well as translocal way are introduced and “entangled” in unexpected contexts. Under the aforementioned waterfall appear pictures of other waterfalls in such a way that the impressions and analyses in the text overlay one another. It was precisely the bold and startling comparison in his publications that offered Alexander von Humboldt the chance to educate his readership to be *active* readers and to simultaneously contribute to the de-provincialization of a kind of thought – as Humboldt argued within the framework of the *Disputa* – that reduced everything to traditional classifications through the complicity of “systematic ideas.” In its transareal dimension, Humboldt's hemispheric science was a science of and derived from movement.

Finally, looking at the use of the term “hemisphere” in the five volumes of Humboldt's *Kosmos* (1845-1862), one can identify – from the very beginning of this work in

its examination of America, and in keeping with its ambition to be a “physical description of the world” – an expansion of the hemispheric concept to include the cosmic. Thus does the tropical world of the Andes give a broad overview making for a kind of summarizing simultaneity, as it were, just as Humboldt had undertaken decades before in his *Tableau physique des Andes*:

In the deeply furrowed Andes chain of New Granada and Quito, mankind is afforded a simultaneous view of all manner of plants and all the stars in the heavens. One’s view encompasses the heliconia flowers, lofty palms, bamboo and other forms in the tropical world: oak forests, types of mespilus and umbellate growths like in our German homeland; one’s gaze takes in the Southern Cross, the Magellanic Clouds and the leading stars in the Ursae, which circle about the North Pole. Springing from the earth and both hemispheres of the sky is the entire wealth of their phenomena and diverse creations; there the climates are layered on top of one another like the certain plant zones these climates foster; there the laws of decreasing warmth are comprehensible to the attentive observer through the eternal grooves buried in the rock walls of the Andes chain, on the slopes of the mountain range (Humboldt 1845-1862: I, 12).

Further on in *Kosmos*, Humboldt avails himself of the hemisphere concept in a fashion with which we have become well familiar by using it to delineate a southern from a northern and a western from an eastern hemisphere. If the distinction between a northern and southern hemisphere comes primarily into effect where, in an astronomical sense, the subject is visible constellations or galactic dust²² as well as – at the planetary level – where the subject is the distribution of land and water²³, geomagnetism²⁴ or other natural phenomena such as luminous intensity²⁵ or flattening of the earth at its poles²⁶, the distinction between a western and an eastern hemisphere remains mostly – if in no sense generally – within the realm of cultural and historical phenomena and especially in the history of European discoveries²⁷. Links between both subdivisions are also possible, and Humboldt refers to the equally relevant natural and cultural history fact that both the southern and western hemispheres contain the “richest water regions on the face of the earth” (Humboldt 1845-1862: I, 305).

But it is precisely from this hemispheric standpoint that the American continent, since its “discovery” by the Europeans, has had a particular feature owing to this enormous land mass’ that lacks an east-west passage through it: “One could not accustom oneself to the idea that the continent extended like a meridian unbroken from such a high latitude in the southern hemisphere to so high a latitude in the northern one” (Humboldt 1845-1862: II, 309).

From this perspective, America appears, as it were, to be the hemispheric continent *par excellence*. But in the Humboldtian discourse on America, this continent remained

²² See, among others, Humboldt (1845-1862: III, 328).

²³ See, among others, Humboldt (1845-1862: I, 29).

²⁴ See, among others, Humboldt (1845-1862: IV, 88).

²⁵ See, among others, Humboldt (1845-1862: III, 143).

²⁶ See, among others, Humboldt (1845-1862: IV, 29).

²⁷ See, among others, Humboldt (1845-1862: II, 181 – Ancient Age) and Humboldt (1845-1862: 266 – Transition to the Modern Era).

integrated in transareal and transregional relational networks. With expressions and correlations that still surprise us today, the scientific writing of Alexander von Humboldt can demonstrate in an impressive fashion that manifestations of diversity and heterogeneity in America always require a hemispheric approach, and that an individual phenomenon – as Humboldt wrote in his letter of 16 July 1799, cited at the beginning of our analysis – can only acquire its multi-layered meaning through a wide-ranging perspective that links extremely varied spheres of knowledge. The investigation into Alexander von Humboldt's hemispheric constructions should furthermore show us that an inquiry into hemispheric phenomena always has transareal, transregional and translocal relations as a prerequisite, if it is not to be caught up in static concepts and overlook the global dynamics of its objects. Thus can Humboldtian science exhibit a much promising potential for the twenty-first century, particularly in overcoming the boundary lines of regional research conceived solely in interdisciplinary terms.

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