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*Beiträge*

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## **The Scientist as Weltbürger: Alexander von Humboldt and the Beginning of Cosmopolitics**



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## The loneliness of a *Weltbürger*

An old man stands alone at the window of Potsdam Palace, in the center of the city. Some years later, a neighbour notes:

Noch sehe ich ihn im Geiste Morgen für Morgen am Fenster stehen, die Spatzen fütternd, mit seinem weißen Gelock auf der Denkerstirn; noch sehe ich ihn sitzen bei der Lampe trauten Schein, an seinem "Kosmos" arbeitend, bis tief in die Nacht hinein.<sup>1</sup>

In this short and telling portrait, the repetition impresses us as it leads to the appearance of an almost icon-like re-presentation. The inhabitant of Potsdam Palace—whose reconstruction is fiercely debated in the capital of the state of Brandenburg—is none other than Alexander von Humboldt. The windows of his apartment, looking out on the later "Humboldtstrasse"—where his brother Wilhelm was reported to have been born just a few yards away—thus allowed us this insight into a vital rhythm and life-style. In fact, it was characterized not only by an extremely low need for sleep but also by an extreme regularity interrupted only by Humboldt's obligations as chamberlain at the Prussian Court. Simultaneously, this double photograph of different activities in the early morning and late at night suggests something almost monastic and Franciscan which adds a religious tone to the image of the old man with the white hair. As a matter of fact, Humboldt had been working for long years on different volumes of his *Cosmos* and other writings in his well-heated apartment at the King's residence next to the river Havel. Yet the "Preface" of the first volume of his *Cosmos* is dated "Potsdam, November 1844"<sup>2</sup>. His dialogue with the birds and the books, although based upon the observation of a good neighbour, nevertheless corresponds to the Humboldt mythology already established during his lifetime—and Alexander was not completely innocent of its development. The "old man of the mountains", as Humboldt sometimes liked to call himself, had long before become his own monument.

Potsdam occupies a very special, strangely ambivalent place in the life of Alexander von Humboldt. He was given the freedom of the city of Potsdam long before Berlin did so, accepting and celebrating him symbolically in its community. The official ceremony<sup>3</sup> took place on October 21 in 1849 when Humboldt was already preparing the third volume of his *Cosmos*. In his courteous address, Alexander did not forget to mention the birth of his brother Wilhelm at Potsdam and highlighted the fact that he had "ornamented" the name of the city in almost every publication during the last years, a city where he had spent—without counting his frequent interruptions—already 22 years in his "eventful and turbulent life"<sup>4</sup> ("vielbewegtes Leben"). Nevertheless, the relationship between Humboldt and Potsdam was defined from the very start under the sign of distance and solitude. In one of his so-called *Youth Letters*, a collection that is readable as a highly significant *éducation sentimentale*, Humboldt wrote a letter dated Potsdam, April 10, 1792 to his beloved friend Carl Freiesleben, left behind at Freiberg. Arriving after a trip that lasted two days and one night, Humboldt had gone to the "royal gar-

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1 Cited by Engelmann, Gerhard: *Alexander von Humboldt in Potsdam*. Zur 200. Wiederkehr seines Geburtstages. Potsdam: Bezirksheimatmuseum 1969, p. 8.

2 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*. 5 Bde. Stuttgart – Tübingen: Cotta 1845–1861, hier Bd. I, p. XVI.

3 Cf. Engelmann, Gerhard: *Alexander von Humboldt in Potsdam*, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

4 Cf. the different versions of Humboldt's address in *ibid.*, pp. 28 ff.

den”, deeply impressed by the “Pracht der Gegenstände, die mich umgaben, *Sans Souci*, das neue Schloß und alle verlassenen Paläste des verstorbenen Königs”<sup>5</sup>. Even in the midst of a wonderful garden landscape, everything stands under the sign of desertedness and solitude. He writes to his friend that he had “unwillingly taken his blue book” “weil Sie mit eigener Hand manches hineingeschrieben haben”—successfully: “der Gedanke, künftig mit Ihnen zu leben, der Gedanke, daß dies im Grunde doch mal in meinem Willen stehen muß, heiterte mich auf und ich blickte nun froher in die Zukunft”<sup>6</sup>. And he adds: “Es ist doch etwas so großes, sich mit Innigkeit zu lieben, daß der Gedanke allein eine Welt von Freuden in sich schließt.”<sup>7</sup> This future was that of a shared life which had never been realized. The fear of desertedness is the *basso continuo* between the lines of this letter up to its post-script: “Werden Sie den verworrenen Brief wohl lesen können?”<sup>8</sup>

The sequence of the *Youth Letters* shows how the exaltation of another friendship and love—for his student companion at Frankfurt on Oder, Wilhelm Gabriel Wegener—had turned into spatial distance and desertedness where loneliness and hard work took the place of pleasure and joy. Geographic distances and spatial experiences always seem to be directly linked to Humboldt’s physical and psychical strength or weakness. For example, he stated in a letter of September 23, 1790 from Hamburg (where he studied at J. G. Büsch’s Trade Academy after finishing his studies at the University of Göttingen) to his close but distanced friend Wegener:

Gott! was habe ich alles gesehen, seitdem ich Berlin verließ. In wie verschiedene Lagen bin ich gekommen, wie viele interessante Menschen habe ich kennen gelernt. Ich lebe hier nicht fröhlich, aber zufrieden. Ich habe an Bildung viel gewonnen; ich fing an, mit mir selbst zufrieden zu werden, ich war in Göttingen sehr fleißig—aber um so tiefer fühl’ ich, was noch alles übrig ist. Meine Gesundheit hat sehr gelitten, wenn sie gleich durch die Reise mit Forster wieder etwas gewann. Auch hier bin ich so beschäftigt, daß ich mich nicht schonen kann. Es ist ein Treiben in mir, daß ich oft denke, ich verliere mein bischen Verstand. Und doch ist dies Treiben so notwendig, um rastlos nach guten Zwecken hin-zuwirken.<sup>9</sup>

This short psychogramme allows us a glimpse at the psychical balance which young Alexander von Humboldt tried to establish and secure between inner motion, human passion, corporal strain and moral obligation. The travels with Georg Forster to the lower Rhine region, the Netherlands, England and France—later masterfully executed by James Cook’s companion in his second voyage around the world in his *Ansichten vom Niederrhein*—became a real *Bildungsreise* for the young Prussian and reduced the pressure in Humboldt’s search for balance. Even the most stressful travels—and Alexander knew this very well—usually had very positive consequences for his physical health. His *Voyage aux Régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent*, realized between 1799 and 1804, is the best-known but not the only example of such self-therapy. His “youth letters” show us that Alexander was very conscious of this fact, the precise observer of Nature being at the same time an attentive observer of himself. In his letter on

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5 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Die Jugendbriefe 1787–1799*. Herausgegeben und erläutert von Ilse Jahn und Fritz G. Lange. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1973, p. 180.

6 *ibid.*

7 *ibid.*

8 *ibid.*

9 *ibid.*, pp. 106 ff.

November 6, 1791 from Freiberg—where he had already made the acquaintance of Freiesleben, he explained to his Scottish friend Archibald Maclean (whom he had come to know during his studies at Hamburg) and even more to himself:

Meine Fröhlichkeit hat freilich seit Jahren sehr abgenommen. Körperliche Ursachen sind gewiß viel daran schuld. Wenn ich ein Paar Monathe in Ruhe sein werde, will ich ernsthaft auf Gegenmittel denken. Was mir vielleicht am meisten schadet, ist ein Geist der Unruhe, ein Streben nach Thätigkeit, das mich plagt. Aus dieser inneren Unruhe erkläre ich es mir, warum große körperliche Anstrengung mich so schnell aufheitert. Es ist dann eine Art von Gleichgewicht im physischen und moralischen Menschen. Dabei fehlt es mir an so vielen Ursachen zur Fröhlichkeit, durch die sie in anderen erwacht. Sinnliche Bedürfnisse kenne ich nicht, ja selbst der Umgang und die Freundschaft kenntnißvoller Menschen ist mir gleichgültig, wenn ich nicht im Moralischen mit ihnen harmoniere. Um nicht kalt und untheilnehmend zu scheinen, muß ich Interesse für so viele Dinge affektiren, die mir gleichgültig sind. Ich habe es mir, eben so sehr aus Eitelkeit, einen angenehmen Eindruck zu machen, als aus Gutmüthigkeit, zur Pflicht gemacht, Jedem etwas Verbindliches zu sagen, mich in die Laune und die individuelle Lage jedes Menschen zu fügen, so daß mir vieler Umgang oft ein Zwang wird. So wie aber meine Heiterkeit abnimmt, so erwacht desto lebhafter in mir, mit jedem Jahre, die Wärme und Innigkeit gegen meine Freunde. Dieser Genuß entschädigt mich reichlich. Noch habe ich kein Land der Erde gefunden, auf dem der Fluch der Gottheit so ruhte, daß kein athmendes Wesen wäre, das man an sein Herz drücken und mit Liebe umfassen könnte.<sup>10</sup>

Probably no other text shows with such transparency Humboldt's determined and often desperate need not simply to dominate his inner restlessness but to integrate it in an equilibrium allowing him to participate in social life *and* to follow his inner impulse he called, on another occasion in 1806, his "esprit d'inquiétude morale"<sup>11</sup>. Undoubtedly, such passages—not too rare in his early letters—are committed to his intent to control, to master and to sublimate his affections and emotional forces and desires, beginning with disciplining his own body (being the object of repeated reflections and experiments). The "moral restlessness", the "Treiben" and his emotions are literally translated in corporal motions, reducing love to the measure of friendship giving spatial distance and travelling (as opposed to physical proximity) a highly therapeutical sense. Interior motions are transformed into exterior movements, restlessness translated into an unending search for knowledge. Erotic repression—as manifested in his assertion that he ignores "sensual needs"—is still precarious, as underlined by his letter to Freiesleben from *Sanssouci*, with its fantasy of a future common life with his friend. The "world of joy" Humboldt projects in his friendship and love for Freiesleben is placed in a specific tension with the idea that in not a single country of the world, as far as he knows, friendship and love are lacking. Quietness and physical strain, sedentary and nomadic existence, citizenship and *Weltbürgertum* constitute poles of tensions that structure his long life. The honoured citizen of Potsdam is a citizen of the world, he is part of a sometimes ironically viewed local community and, at the same time, of an imagined community he projected in global dimensions. His loneliness in the midst of innumerable contacts has always been Alexander von Humboldt's loyal companion.

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10 *ibid.*, p. 157.

11 Humboldt, Alexander von: Mes confessions, à lire et à me renvoyer un jour. In: *Le Globe* (Genève) 7 (janvier–février 1868), p. 188.

## The world in our head

To avoid possible misunderstandings: I do not intend to “explain” Humboldt’s scientific activities and travels by recurring only to a psychic constellation. A further analysis will make us understand that his famous but often evaded *Jugendbriefe* offer not only his *éducation sentimentale* but also his *éducation scientifique et politique*. Without this, we would be unable to rethink Humboldt’s further life beyond his mining activities as a Prussian *Oberbergat*.

Humboldt’s life cannot be reduced to a simple development from the narrowness of Tegel Palace<sup>12</sup> and Berlin to the impressive landscapes of South America, the Caribbean, the United States, Russia and Siberia even close to the Chinese border, passing through Frankfurt on Oder, Göttingen, Hamburg, Freiberg, Paris and Madrid. His nomadic existence leads him not only from the plains of Berlin to those of the Orinoco, the Peruvian coast, the Russian tundra and the deserts of his Western and his Eastern voyage; it leads him back to the narrowness of Berlin and Potsdam which represent a complement which Humboldt often complained about. Writing and scientific activity are the most important antidote to a political, social, economic and cultural “development” or, more properly, lethargy that surrounded him, deriding the idea of progress he viewed with increasing scepticism without ever abandoning it. His work on *Cosmos* as well as on the third edition of *Ansichten der Natur* created the free intellectual spaces he needed; they do not allow one to reduce the last third of his life, i.e. from 1829/1830 to 1859 (after his return from Russia and Siberia), to a period when the field research of the scientist in the tropics is replaced by visits to tropical plants in greenhouses and palm gardens he had helped to design.<sup>13</sup> The inner world, the world in his head, is as significant as Humboldt’s experiences in the exterior world in different regions of our planet if we choose to consider, from our own perspective today, the totality of his work and achievements. In numerous passages of

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12 The impressive ambivalence of *Schloß Tegel* for Alexander von Humboldt is evident in a letter he wrote precisely at Tegel on June 5, 1792 (exactly seven years before leaving Europe for the New World), a beautiful letter once more addressed to Carl Freiesleben: “Tegel ist kein eigentliches Dorf, sondern ein Jagdschloß, von dem großen Kurfürsten gebaut und von meinem Vater ganz umgeschaffen. Es liegt an dem Ufer eines 1 1/2 Meilen langen Sees, der von schön angebauten Inseln durchschnitten ist. Hügel mit Weinreben, die wir hier Berghe nennen, große Pflanzungen von ausländischen Hölzern, Wiesen, die das Schloß umgeben und überraschende Aussichten auf die mahlerischen Ufer des Sees machen diesen Ort allerdings zu dem reizendsten Aufenthalte der hiesigen Gegend. [...] Hier in Tegel habe ich den größeren Theil dieses traurigen Lebens zugebracht, unter Leuten, die mich liebten, mir wohlwollten, und mit denen ich mir doch in keiner Empfindung begegnete, in tausendfältigem Zwange, in einebnender Einsamkeit, in Verhältnissen, wo ich zu steter Verstellung, Aufopferungen gezwungen wurde. Wenn ich mich noch jetzt, da ich frei und ungestört hier lebe, hingeben will in den Genuß, den die reizende, anmuthsvolle Natur hier in so reichem Maaße gewährt, so werde ich zurückgerufen durch die widrigsten Eindrücke, durch Erinnerungen an meine Kinderjahre, die fast jeder leblose Gegenstand hier rege macht. So wemüthig solche Erinnerungen aber auch sind, so interessant werden sie einem zugleich auch durch den Gedanken, daß gerade dieser Aufenthalt so viel zu der jezigen Stimmung meines Charakters, zu der Richtung meines Geistes auf das Studium der Natur beitrug.” (Humboldt, Alexander von: *Die Jugendbriefe*, op.cit., p. 192.) In this masterfully deployed scenery, a sort of primal scene of Humboldt’s loneliness, the literary representation of Tegel as *locus amoenus* is deeply scarred by bitter remembrances of repression and disgust. They underline the contrast that is always essential for Humboldt’s writing, allowing us at the same time a deep insight into the development of his inner world intimately connected with Nature.

13 At the end of his “Ideen zu einer Physiognomik der Gewächse”, integrated in the first edition of his *Ansichten der Natur*, the Prussian author—who never neglected occasions to highlight the significance of greenhouses and botanical gardens—noted: “Die krankenden Gewächse, welche

his writings, Humboldt gave voice to his conviction that the aesthetic transmission of the phenomena of natural history, the harmony of science and art, can give to the (European) inhabitant of northern regions a sensual re-presentation of tropical vegetation and natural forces, thus compensating for the *lack* of daily intimacy with a powerful Nature, a lack that characterizes, from his point of view, human life and experience in the temperate zones of our planet:

Diesen und so manchen andern Naturgenuß entbehren die nordischen Völker. [...] Aber in der Ausbildung unserer Sprache, in der glühenden Phantasie des Dichters, in der darstellenden Kunst der Maler, ist eine reiche Quelle des Ersatzes geöffnet. Aus ihr schöpft unsere Einbildungskraft die lebendigen Bilder einer exotischen Natur. Im kühlen Norden, in der öden Heide, kann der einsame Mensch sich aneignen, was in den fernsten Erdstrichen erforscht wird, und so in seinem Innern eine Welt sich schaffen, welche das Werk seines Geistes, frei und unvergänglich, wie dieser, ist.<sup>14</sup>

Science and art seem to occupy the empty space of a loss, a lack that has risen to consciousness only because of the globalization of communication and exchange. The “lonely human being” in the “desert heathland” of the North, both become forms of *Ersatz*, to some degree a re-placement that may attract our attention to the libidinous dimension of a prolific and powerful tropical Nature in Humboldt’s thought. The “sickly plants” in northern greenhouses make evident that this kind of spatial replacement (or misplacement) may have immediate consequences for our health. In the precarious economy of physical and psychical health, for Humboldt, the interior world, created by man, becomes the *Ersatz* of the loss of symbolic richness that became evident in its ecstatic impact in his first letters after his arrival at the coasts of Cumaná in *Tierra firme*:

Wie die Narren laufen wir bis itzt umher; in den ersten drei Tagen können wir nichts bestimmen, da man immer einen Gegenstand wegwirft, um einen andern zu ergreifen. Bonpland versichert, daß er von Sinnen kommen werde, wenn die Wunder nicht bald aufhören. [...] Ich fühle es, daß ich hier sehr glücklich sein werde und daß diese Eindrücke mich auch künftig noch oft erheitern werden.<sup>15</sup>

Neither Humboldt nor Bonpland became victims of permanent insanity. And in spite of Humboldt’s love of tropical vegetation, it would be wrong to conclude from the passages cited above that the author of *Vues des Cordillères* would have been convinced that the totality of Nature could be overlooked from one particular spot on our planet—even in the case of the Chimborazo that for Humboldt (as for his contemporaries) was the most elevated point on earth. It is therefore interesting to read the final part of his “Anregungsmittel zum Naturstudium”, integrated in the second volume of his *Cosmos* finished at Potsdam and published in 1847:

Aber nicht die lebendige Beschreibung jener reich geschmückten Länder der Aequinoctial-Zone allein, in welcher Intensität des Lichts und feuchte Wärme die Entwicklung aller

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unsere Treibhäuser einschließen, gewähren nur ein schwaches Bild von der Majestät der Tropenvegetation.” Humboldt, Alexander von: *Ansichten der Natur mit wissenschaftlichen Erläuterungen*. Tübingen: Cotta 1808, p. 204.

14 *ibid.*, pp. 203 ff.

15 Letter from Alexander to Wilhelm von Humboldt, from Cumaná on July 16, 1799; in: Humboldt, Alexander von: *Briefe aus Amerika 1799–1804*. Bearbeitet von Ulrike Moheit. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1993, p. 42.

organischen Kräfte beschleunigen und erhöhen, hat in unseren Tagen dem gesammten Naturstudium einen mächtigen Reiz verschafft. Der geheime Zauber, durch den ein tiefer Blick in das organische Leben anregend wirkt, ist nicht auf die Tropenwelt allein beschränkt. Jeder Erdstrich bietet die Wunder fortschreitender Gestaltung und Gliederung, nach wiederkehrenden oder leise abweichenden Typen, dar. Allverbreitet ist das furchtbare Reich der Naturmächte, welche den uralten Zwist der Elemente in der wolken schweren Himmelsdecke wie in dem zarten Gewebe der belebten Stoffe zu bindender Eintracht lösen. Darum können alle Theile des weiten Schöpfungskreises, vom Aequator bis zur kalten Zone, überall wo der Frühling eine Knospe entfaltet, sich einer begeisternden Kraft auf das Gemüth erfreuen. Zu einem solchen Glauben ist unser deutsches Vaterland vor allem berechtigt. Wo ist das südlichere Volk, welches uns nicht den großen Meister der Dichtung beneiden sollte, dessen Werke alles ein tiefes Gefühl der Natur durchdringt: in den Leiden des jungen Werthers wie in den Erinnerungen an Italien, in der Metamorphose der Gewächse wie in seinen vermischten Gedichten?<sup>16</sup>

This long quotation not only contains an *hommage* to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose conception of nature and, even more, whose aesthetics were important impulses and orientations for Humboldt throughout his life, although without making it into dogma. This passage also makes clear that the global validity of natural powers (and natural laws) produces precisely the differences and variations allowing genuine forms in every climatic or hydrographic zone. This is the interplay of identity and difference that fascinated Humboldt so much. Spring is not a world-wide phenomenon but is inserted here in opposition to the tropics. This means that the inhabitants of *one* singular region of the earth can never make a direct experience of *all* natural phenomena as long as certain material or intellectual forms of travelling will not allow them to do so. The concrete existence in *one* region is always characterized by a loss, a lack of immediate experience of other forms, so that the experience with nature (and its laws) will always be fragmentary. The differences that produce the richness of forms and variations in nature therefore transform the perception of the earth in an always fragmentary experience. The world in our head, stimulated by art, science and literature, can counteract the experience of lack in planetarian thought. Cosmos as natural *and* aesthetic order<sup>17</sup>, founded upon the concrete experience of the traveler, the capacity of the scientist to make world-wide comparisons and the creative force of literary synthesis, achieve their function: to present the *whole* world in a *single* book that collects it all from one single point of view. In a letter to Varnhagen von Ense, dated from October 24, 1834 at Berlin, Humboldt writes in a fascinating euphoria mixed with a certain scepticism that is so typically “humboldtian”:

Ich fange den Druck meines Werks (des Werks meines Lebens) an. Ich habe den tollen Einfall, die ganze materielle Welt, alles was wir heute von den Erscheinungen der Himmelsräume und des Erdenlebens, von den Nebelsternen bis zur Geographie der Moose auf den Granitfelsen, wissen, alles in Einem Werke darzustellen, und in einem Werke, das zugleich in lebendiger Sprache anregt und das Gemüth ergötzt. Jede große und wichtige Idee, die irgendwo aufgeglimmt, muß neben den Thatsachen hier verzeichnet sein.<sup>18</sup>

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16 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Kosmos, op.cit.*, Bd. II, p. 75.

17 Cf. Böhme, Hartmut: *Ästhetische Wissenschaft. Aporien der Forschung im Werk Alexander von Humboldts* (in print).

18 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt und Varnhagen von Ense aus den Jahren 1827 bis 1858. Nebst Auszügen aus Varnhagen's Tagebüchern, Briefen von Varnhagen und Andern an Humboldt*. Leipzig: Brockhaus 1860, p. 20.

This “work of my life”, whose preface had to be concluded only ten years later at Potsdam, was, to a certain degree, the *summa* he had proposed himself to write, the conclusion of his activities and his knowledge. But first of all, this work is the true expression of the world in Humboldt’s head, interspersed with autobiographical remembrances and characterized by a diminishing circle of immediate experience of the exterior world that allows the reader to appropriate this interior world through the medium of language, of print, i. e. in the Gutenberg Galaxis. But *Cosmos* is even more: in a variation of Immanuel Kant’s well-known title, it is a “General History of Creation in a cosmopolitan intention”.

## ***Weltbürgertum* between Chimborazo and Strait of Magellan**

Let’s go back once more with the author of *Cosmos* to “his” Potsdam Palace that probably will celebrate its resurrection—this could be an idea of Jorge Luis Borges—as a library. In Alexander von Humboldt, there is not only the movement from the interior to the exterior world but the inverse projection as well. With that genuine irony and humour that always characterized him, the author of *Vues des Cordillères* renamed the “Brauhausberg”, a mountain whose peak reaches the height of 88 meters above sea level, by christening it his own “Potsdamer Chimborazo” where he used to walk alone or with a companion even in his eighties.<sup>19</sup> Somewhat less flattering, he declared in 1827, after his move from Paris to Berlin, that for his “Tropen-Natur”, the climate was “wie in der Magellanischen Meerenge feucht, rauh, ohne Himmelslicht”, an allusion to a region in South America he never came to visit, repeated in a letter to Bessel in 1844 and relating the Strait of Magellan directly to the river Havel.<sup>20</sup> A new citizen of Potsdam may disagree with this description of the regional microclimate and agree with the comparison of Potsdam’s strait near the Long Bridge in the shadow of the Chimborazo with the Strait of Magellan although its marine traffic is still—and in spite of all the plans to construct a new Havel Channel hopefully will be—dominated by sailing ships and yachts.

The point that seems significant for me in all these renamings is that Alexander von Humboldt, increasingly reduced to travels between Potsdam and Berlin, refurnished ironically the spot he was living in, and transformed it into his own world by lending it the physiognomy of the “New World”. Not only in his books but also in his walks, he became the citizen of his own world, surpassing the national frontiers. He took it as a matter of course to identify his geographically decreasing world with the one he had travelled so much before; this may offer us a key to understanding this traveler who always saw himself as European and *Weltbürger*.

Now, what is a *Weltbürger*? There is no immediate entry for “cosmopolite” or “cosmopolitisme” in Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique*, but there is a valuable piece of information at the very end of the entry “Patrie”:

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19 Cf. Engelmann, Gerhard: *Alexander von Humboldt in Potsdam, op.cit.*, p. 21. He often invited his friend, cartographer Heinrich Berghaus, with the following words: “Kommen Sie mit; die Bewegung wird Ihnen, dem Vielsitzenden, gut tun, und überdem bitt’ ich Sie, mir beim Besteigen unsers Potsdamer Chimborazo ein klein wenig zur Stütze zu dienen.” (*ibid.*)

20 *ibid.*, p. 7.

Telle est donc la condition humaine, que souhaiter la grandeur de son pays c'est souhaiter du mal à ses voisins. Celui qui voudrait que sa patrie ne fût jamais ni plus grande, ni plus petite, ni plus riche, ni plus pauvre, serait le citoyen de l'univers.<sup>21</sup>

The realization of the model of what Voltaire has come to call “citoyen de l'univers” could be found in a passage of chapter XXVI in Humboldt's *Relation historique*, his *Personal Narrative*. Discussing the future relationship between Europe and America—understanding by the latter not what some of his contemporaries and the common language of today seem to have identified with the United States—as well as the future development of the Spanish colonies in their successful struggle for independence, he declared:

Sans doute qu'après les grandes révolutions que subit l'état des sociétés humaines, la fortune publique, qui est le patrimoine commun de la civilisation, se trouve différemment répartie entre les peuples des deux mondes; mais peu à peu l'équilibre se rétablit, et c'est un préjugé funeste, j'oserois presque dire impie, que de considérer comme une calamité pour la vieille Europe la prospérité croissante de toute autre portion de notre planète. L'indépendance des colonies ne contribuera pas à les isoler, elle les rapprochera plutôt des peuples anciennement civilisés. Le commerce tend à unir ce qu'une politique jalouse a séparé depuis long-temps. Il y a plus encore: il est de la nature de la civilisation de pouvoir se porter en avant sans s'éteindre pour cela dans le lieu qui l'a vu naître. Sa marche progressive de l'est à l'ouest, de l'Asie en Europe, ne prouve rien contre cet axiome. Une vive lumière conserve son éclat même lorsqu'elle éclaire un plus grand espace. La culture intellectuelle, source féconde de la richesse nationale, se communique de proche en proche; elle s'étend sans se déplacer.<sup>22</sup>

We will see what kind of politics Humboldt wanted to oppose to the “politique jalouse” of European colonial powers. Even in the use of his metaphores, he follows the ideas of the philosophers of Enlightenment that Voltaire may represent here as principal witness. Humboldt highlights the direct link between the existence of world-wide communications and the economic interests of the nations of the so-called “Old World”. Humboldt understands the distribution of wealth and riches (not reducing it to conceptions of national economy) as patrimony of the whole “civilisation” and even connects it to the spread of intellectual culture. His reference to the model of a cultural migration going from the East to the West—a conception that has been rapidly refunctionalized as a means of political hegemony by the United States and other American nations such as the newly independent Mexico—serves him as a discursive element in his conviction of an increasing and ongoing cultural unfolding of mankind. Trade is seen (as in the works of Adam Smith) as the principal impulse of a balanced and even harmonious development; and intellectual culture is presented as the fundament for the wealth of nations, even as a guarantee for cultural unfolding in global dimensions. Voltaire's *citoyen de l'univers* connects his global thinking in Humboldt's words directly with world trade and world culture. This is the birth of a constellation in which a universal history replaces—in the desacralized

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21 Voltaire: *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Bd. IV (*Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, Bd. XX). Paris: Garnier Frères 1879, pp. 185 ff.

22 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Relation historique du Voyage aux Régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent fait en 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, et 1804 par Al. de Humboldt et A. Bonpland, rédigé par Alexandre de Humboldt*. Neudruck des 1814–1825 in Paris erschienenen vollständigen Originals, besorgt, eingeleitet und um ein Register vermehrt von Hanno Beck. Bd. II. Stuttgart: Brockhaus 1970, pp. 58 ff.

terms of a history of mankind—the Christian *Heilsgeschichte*, i.e. an interpretation of history stressing God’s saving grace, characterized by its universal and hegemonial pretensions inherited from Judaic traditions.

In 1784—two years before the death of Friedrich II, the Prussian king whose “deserted palaces” at Potsdam Humboldt had visited in 1792—Immanuel Kant, in his *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, had tried to refocus the problems of unequal and unstable relationships between particular powers by introducing elements of a new global order. Or, as Kant put it, even without so many wars, devastations and destructions, reason could have told us long ago:

aus dem gesetzlosen Zustande der Wilden hinaus zu gehen, und in einen Völkerbund zu treten; wo jeder, auch der kleinste, Staat seine Sicherheit und Rechte, nicht von eigener Macht, oder eigener rechtlichen Beurteilung, sondern allein von diesem großen Völkerbunde (Foedus Amphictyonum), von einer vereinigten Macht, und von der Entscheidung nach Gesetzen des vereinigten Willens, erwarten könnte.<sup>23</sup>

This idea of a “Völkerbund”, a Society of Nations whose concrete realization has been, with its continuous ups and downs, one of the major events of our closing century, one that continues to attract our hopes and fears. It is founded upon a projected future the philosopher of Königsberg has called the “general cosmopolitan situation”<sup>24</sup>. Formulas like the “comforting vision of the future” “in welcher die Menschengattung in weiter Ferne vorgestellt wird, wie sie sich endlich doch zu dem Zustande emporarbeitet, in welchem alle Keime, die die Natur in sie legte, völlig können entwickelt und ihre Bestimmung hier auf Erden kann erfüllet werden”<sup>25</sup>, may show us how much his conception of a future world politics (worthy of its name) is still embedded in (desacralized) Christian universalism. This vision of a still very distant realization of the “cosmopolitan situation” may even have contributed to the fact that Julia Kristeva, in a study that perhaps reduced Kant too much to French philosophical traditions and contexts, on the one hand related the author of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* to the cosmopolitan projections of the *Encyclopédie* and to the enthusiasm of the philosophical precursors of the French Revolution,<sup>26</sup> stressing on the other hand the bold and even utopian character of the cosmopolitan thought of the *Lumières*.<sup>27</sup> For Kant, however, this “general history in cosmopolitan intention” was by no means separated from the investigations and results of empirical analysis in concrete (and not u-topian) situations:

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23 Kant, Immanuel: *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*. In (Ders.): *Werkausgabe*. Herausgegeben von Wilhelm Weischedel. Bd. XI. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1977, p. 42.

24 *ibid.*, p. 47.

25 *ibid.*, p. 49.

26 Kristeva, Julia: *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*. Paris: Gallimard 1988, p. 251: “Et Kant, comme les cosmopolites fougues de la Révolution, mais avec la précision logique d’une argumentation apaisée [...]”

27 *ibid.*, p. 213: “Avec son envers enragé et son endroit généreux, de Fougeret à Montesquieu, le cosmopolitisme apparaît désormais comme une audace, utopique pour le moment, mais avec laquelle doit compter une humanité consciente de ses limites et aspirant à les dépasser dans l’organisation des liens sociaux et des institutions.”

Daß ich mit dieser Idee einer Weltgeschichte, die gewissermaßen einen Leitfaden *a priori* hat, die Bearbeitung der eigentlichen bloß empirisch abgefaßten Historie verdrängen wollte: wäre Mißdeutung meiner Absicht; es ist nur ein Gedanke von dem, was ein philosophischer Kopf (der übrigens sehr geschichtskundig sein müßte) noch aus einem anderen Standpunkte versuchen könnte.<sup>28</sup>

Without doubt, we can recognize in Alexander von Humboldt's works the intention to develop and unfold, from a "different point of view", such a universal history. This "philosophical mind", always trying to ground his investigations in empirical data, had declared to Paul Usteri, in a letter from Freiberg in autumn 1791, that he had started, two years before, a "history of plant migrations" ("Geschichte der Pflanzenwanderungen") he defined not as a study in botany or plant geography but as an "Ausarbeitung dieses so vernachlässigten Theils der Universalgeschichte"<sup>29</sup>. At the age of twenty, Humboldt conceives a scientific program focussing universal history and global connections guided by a "cosmopolitan intention" in the sense of Immanuel Kant. This cosmopolitan dimension in his thought and investigation will be—even in a sense that differed from the Kantian conceptions that had an early impact on his own conceptions—a *leitmotiv* in the writings of this *citoyen de l'univers*, right up to his last best-seller, *Cosmos*.<sup>30</sup> Humboldt's cosmopolitanism even continued developing in the intellectual narrowness of the Prussian Court, constricted between the Strait of Magellan and the Chimborazo, the actual residence of the Brandenburg Parliament, also known as the "Kreml" in times of the former German Democratic Republic.

## Humboldt and a new cosmopolitanism

For Alexander von Humboldt, the development towards a "cosmopolitan situation" was neither a utopia nor a spectacle of philosophical thinkers still situated far away but much more a process he did not only want to observe but in which he wanted to participate. Jaucourt's definition of "cosmopolitain" or "cosmopolite" published in the *Encyclopédie*, pointing out that these expressions served ironically "pour signifier un homme qui n'a point de demeure fixe, ou bien un homme qui n'est étranger nulle part"<sup>31</sup> did not have any impact on his philosophical conceptions in general and on his understanding of the term "Weltbürger" in particular. Supported by the French "cosmopolite"<sup>32</sup> and inspired by ancient sources, the German term "Welt-

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28 Kant, Immanuel: Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht, *op.cit.*, pp. 49 ff.

29 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Jugendbriefe*, *op.cit.*, pp. 163 and 164.

30 In a letter of October 3, 1790, to Georg Forster's father Johann Reinhold, he alluded clearly to the great thinker from Königsberg by referring to the "light that breaks through in an almost unstoppable way from the north", a "Licht, was jetzt so unaufhaltsam (ich möchte sagen, aus seinem ehemaligen latenten Zustande) von Norden her einbricht" (Humboldt, Alexander von: *Jugendbriefe*, *op.cit.*, p. 109).

31 *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*. Nouvelle impression en facsimilé de la première édition de 1751–1780. Bd. 4. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag 1988, p. 297. To an "ancien philosophe" is attributed the sentence to be a "Cosmopolite, c'est-à-dire citoyen de l'univers" (*ibid.*).

32 Grimm, Jacob/Grimm, Wilhelm: *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. Herausgegeben von der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Bd. 14. Leipzig: Verlag S. Hirzel 1955, p. 1555.

bürger” started his temporally limited career meaning a “*mensch von weltweiter gesinnung*” feeling himself as “*bürger der ganzen welt und mitbürger der gesamten*”<sup>33</sup>. Even if the negative connotations contained in the *Encyclopédie* or the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (1721) may still be present in the term “Weltbürger” insofar as it can mean “*ein freizügiger ohne festen heimatssitz und staatsbürgerliche bindungen an ein bestimmtes vaterland*”<sup>34</sup>, it is much more the sense quoted before as well as the “*allerorts heimisches wesen*”<sup>35</sup> that dominates Goethe’s perception of Alexander von Humboldt: “Wohin man rührt, er ist überall zu Hause und überschüttet uns mit geistigen Schätzen.”<sup>36</sup> Goethe used this expression of being at home everywhere in a spatial and geographic sense as well as related to the intellectual attitude and ethical conviction of the “Weltbürger”<sup>37</sup>.

Until the present, the terms “cosmopolitan” and “Weltbürger” shared a rather changeable destiny. In times of strong nationalism and blind xenophobia they were quickly marginalized. Even the internationalized term “cosmopolitan” seemed to have lost definitely any legitimacy, in the 20th century when—from an ideologically motivated perspective—it was opposed to the concept of “internationalism” defined from a socialist point of view. For the influential *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, edited by Georg Klaus and Manfred Buhr in the German Democratic Republic, cosmopolitanism is simply “ideologischer Ausdruck der Klasseninteressen der aufstrebenden Bourgeoisie”<sup>38</sup>. In order to appropriate the cultural heritage of the German Klassik, the “cosmopolitan conceptions” (“weltbürgerliche Vorstellungen”) in the spirit of Lessing, Kant, Fichte, Herder, Schiller, Goethe, the Humboldt brothers and others are presented in opposition to “feudalistic provincialism”; but the cosmopolitanism of our times, i.e. the “cosmopolitanism of imperialist bourgeoisie”, appears as “reaktionär” because it serves the “Apologie des nationalen Verrats und der Begründung und Rechtfertigung internationaler Vereinigungen des Monopolkapitals”<sup>39</sup>.

By playing off “socialist internationalism” against a cosmopolitanism as “Kehrseite des bürgerlichen Nationalismus und Chauvinismus”<sup>40</sup>, this ideological antagonism signified a heavy blow against the terms “cosmopolitan” and “Weltbürger” even far beyond socialism, as a study in

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33 *ibid.*, p. 1557.

34 As an example, a quotation from Kotzebue underlines the latent negative relation between the “Weltgewandter” and the “Weitgereister”: “auf reisen erwirbt man eine edle dreistigkeit – man wird ein weltbürger” (*ibid.*).

35 *ibid.*

36 Eckermann, Johann Peter: *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*. Herausgegeben von Fritz Bergemann. Bd. I. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag 1981, p. 171.

37 I have tried to show how this passage quoted from Goethe’s conversations with Eckermann can be understood in a scientific and even more epistemological and transdisciplinary sense; cf. Ette, Ottmar: Alexander von Humboldt heute. In: *Alexander von Humboldt – Netzwerke des Wissens*. Katalog der Ausstellung im Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin) vom 5. Juni bis 15. August 1999 und in der Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Bonn) vom 15. September 1999 bis 9. Januar 2000. Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1999, pp. 19–31.

38 Klaus, Georg/Buhr, Manfred (Hg.): *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*. Bd. 1. Leipzig: VEB Bibliographisches Institut 1975, p. 667.

39 *ibid.*

40 *ibid.*

the field of human sciences would probably prove. To certain negative connotations that were present since the 18th century and to a certain diffuse “anachronism” of these terms, the ideological binarism added anti-progressive and reactionary significations. Nevertheless, not only in everyday life from the World Wide Web to the titles of popular magazines, but also in the field of scientific research or in cultural theory, one notes that at least since the so-called end of the Cold War the term “cosmopolitanism” is re-semanticized with positive elements that may lead to its resurrection in new forms and contexts. In the context of the tenth birthday of the *House of World Cultures* in Berlin, some weeks ago, the Chicago-based Homi K. Bhabha, born in India and today one of the leading cultural theorists, for example, favoured a “language of a new cosmopolitan order”<sup>41</sup>. He took note of different efforts “to develop a cosmopolitan spirit that places the experience of the ‘minority’ as central to any notion of global citizenship”<sup>42</sup>. A real international and intercultural dialogue, in the feeling of Bhabha, can only be possible “when we are willing to treat our own national and regional ‘interests’ and identities as radically ‘incomplete’”<sup>43</sup>.

Again, we find ourselves confronted with the experience of the own under the sign of loss and lack. In a different way, Homi K. Bhabha focuses on the problems of cultural, ethnic and other minorities in the context of a new concept of “cosmopolitanism” which has—as far as I can see—rarely been consciously open to such problems without ever excluding it openly. In fact, Kant explicitly included the weakest—although on the level of states and nations, of course—in his conception of a “Völkerbund” or Society of Nations. As a vision of a new order against xenophobia and the persecution of minorities, cosmopolitanism is therefore integrated in an interculturally organized discourse—or, at least, in a discourse organized by the “intercultural” terminology.

Not less important is Bhabha’s stressing of the radical “incompleteness” of the Own, of our own interests and identities. This idea, I think, is inscribed in a long tradition leading back at least to the 18th century and later elaborated by German romanticism.

There is perhaps no other form of intercultural dialogue that equals the intensity of literary translation.<sup>44</sup> In a famous and often debated essay, one of the most inspiring cultural theorists (who has profoundly marked—in spite of or because of his repeated “incontemporarity”—the cultural theory of the 20th century) has translated the problem of translationary activities in the metaphor of the vessel (Gefäß) of pure and perfect language which has broken into different pieces. Walter Benjamin’s essay about the task of the translator specifies:

Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht so zu gleichen haben, so muß, anstatt dem Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis

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41 Bhabha, Homi K.: *House of World Cultures*. Ms. 1999, p. 5.

42 *ibid.*, p. 7.

43 *ibid.*

44 Cf. Ette, Ottmar: *Mit Worten des Anderen. Die literarische Übersetzung als Herausforderung der Literaturwissenschaft*. In: Armbruster, Claudius/Hopfe, Karin (Hg.): *Horizont-Verschiebungen. Interkulturelles Verstehen und Heterogenität in der Romania*. Festschrift für Karsten Garscha zum 60. Geburtstag. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag 1998, pp. 13–33.

ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich anbildet, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache erkennbar zu machen.<sup>45</sup>

The task of the translator, in relationship to the myth of Babel, is seen as a kind of *bricolage* making a contribution to a lost unity, to a lost entity. Translating is an activity against a loss, against split and fragmentation. At the same time, it sharpens the consciousness of the own under the sign of lack or loss. The painful insight into one's own incompleteness becomes the starting point and motivation for an activity of mediation between languages and cultures. The understanding of a radical incompleteness of one's own language and one's own culture is—in the sense of Walter Benjamin and later Homi K. Bhabha—the root of intercultural dialogue.

Goethe is not unfamiliar with such conceptions. On January 31 1827, he explains to Eckermann:

Aber freilich, wenn wir Deutschen nicht aus dem engen Kreise unserer eigenen Umgebung hinausblicken, so kommen wir gar zu leicht in diesen pedantischen Dünkel. Ich sehe mich daher gerne bei fremden Nationen um und rate jedem, es auch seinerseits zu tun. Nationalliteratur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Weltliteratur ist an der Zeit, und jeder muß jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen.<sup>46</sup>

The concept of “Weltliteratur”, created by Goethe himself and shaped by him in quite different manners, is developed here in the experience of the limitations of the own and the consciousness of a fragmentation in different national literatures. In analogy to world trade (“Welthandel”) or world traffic (“Weltverkehr”), *world literature* is a communication metaphor, a complex interconnectivity between the own (the own writing, for example) and the other (the writing in other languages, for example), a relationship that highlights the importance of the task of the translator. In the context of our questions, it is decisive to understand fragmentation as motor of an individual network as well as collective acceleration of what Goethe calls the “epoch of world literature”. We have already seen that this comprehension guided Humboldt's experience of Nature in his *Cosmos* as necessarily fragmented as long as it is bound to the experience in only one region or climatic zone. The allusion to Goethe in the quoted passage is highly significant not only for his aesthetic and philosophical guidelines but as well for his view and interpretation of intercultural dialogue. The openness of relations in the intercultural interplay of the most diverse literary texts (as explained by Goethe's reflection on January 31 1827) does not presuppose a de-centered system of world literature. This explains why the quoted passage continues with a highly significant precision:

Aber auch bei solcher Schätzung des Ausländischen dürfen wir nicht bei etwas Besonderem haften bleiben und dieses für musterhaft ansehen wollen. Wir müssen nicht denken, das Chinesische wäre es, oder das Serbische, oder Calderon, oder die Nibelungen; sondern im Bedürfnis von etwas Musterhaftem müssen wir immer zu den alten Griechen zurückgehen, in deren Werken stets der schöne Mensch dargestellt ist. Alles übrige müssen wir nur historisch betrachten und das Gute, so weit es gehen will, uns daraus aneignen.<sup>47</sup>

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45 Benjamin, Walter: Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers. In (Ders.): *Gesammelte Schriften*. Herausgegeben von Tillman Rexroth. Bd. IV, 1. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1972, p. 18.

46 Eckermann, Johann Peter: *Gespräche mit Goethe, op.cit.*, p. 211.

47 *ibid.*, pp. 211ff.

The system of values that underlie the concept of world literature (that seems globally conceived and open only at first glance) is oriented towards the cultural development and the art of the ancient world—or even more: a “Weimarian” interpretation of ancient Greece—thus creating a co-ordinate system of hierarchical values. This co-ordinate system is analogous to the cartographic nets European cartographers designed following European aims and fixing meridians useful for European purposes. We can find this kind of openness and limitation of the Goethean concept of “world literature” as well in Humboldt’s conceptions, not only in his own literary history of the study of Nature with—as we could say with Kant—“cosmopolitan intention”: his “Geschichte der physischen Weltanschauung” integrated in the second volume of his *Cosmos*.<sup>48</sup> They are omnipresent in all his works of scientific analysis and cultural philosophy. In his introduction to *Vues des Cordillères et Monuments des Peuples Indigènes de l’Amérique*, dated Paris in April 1813, he insists upon the difference between the “aspect morne et sombre” of the mythologies, cults and monuments of Peruvians and Mexicans on the one hand and, on the other, “les arts et les douces fictions des peuples de la Grèce”<sup>49</sup>. A few pages later, at the entrance of the main text, he unfolds a kind of universal map of (ancient) world cultures:

Les recherches sur les monuments élevés par des nations à demi-barbares, ont encore un autre intérêt qu’on pourroit nommer psychologique: elles offrent à nos yeux le tableau de la marche uniforme et progressive de l’esprit humain. Les ouvrages des premiers habitants du Mexique tiennent le milieu entre ceux des peuples scythes et les monuments antiques de l’Indostan. Quel spectacle imposant nous offre le génie de l’homme, parcourant l’espace qu’il y a depuis les tombeaux de Tinian et les statues de l’île de Paques [sic!] jusqu’aux monumens du temple mexicain de Milta [sic!]; et depuis les idoles informes que renfermoit ce temple, jusqu’aux chefs-d’oeuvres du ciseau de Praxitèle et de Lysippe!<sup>50</sup>

For Alexander von Humboldt, as for Goethe, the “génie de l’homme” is seen from a bird’s-eye view or a cartographic perspective on the development of mankind, and is undoubtedly centered by the occidental genius with its cultural and anthropological conceptions inherited from ancient Greece that dominate the panorama of different cultures forming the “world culture”, as we could say in analogy to the concept of “world literature”. The meridian of this universal map of world cultures to the study of which Humboldt has contributed so much, was determined by the history of the Occident. The “cosmopolitan intention” (“weltbürgerliche Absicht”) is (considering it from our actual point of view) a clearly eurocentric one, a form of (scientific) appropriation of knowledge focussed on European necessities.

The “naturalness” and apparent “evidence” of a universalizing perspective is, as far as I can see, one of the fundamental characteristics of *European* cosmopolitanism, even beyond the 18th and 19th century. In his study of some of the major attempts to conceive a philosophical reason that could be decontextualized as far as possible from regional conditions, Heinz Krumpel not only refers to Hegel’s well-known statements but also mentions more subtle intentions in 20th century (European) philosophy to consider the undeniable variety of philosophical traditions worldwide. Hegel’s or Heidegger’s conviction that philosophy can only be thought and ex-

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48 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Kosmos, op.cit.*, vol. II, pp. 135–532.

49 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Vues des Cordillères et Monuments des Peuples Indigènes de l’Amérique* Nanterre: Editions Erasme 1989, p. XVI.

50 *ibid.*, p. 2.

pressed in ancient Greek or in German<sup>51</sup> and even the argument of a unilateral universalization are closely linked to the tradition of “Weltbürgertum” and “cosmopolitanism”. A good example is Edmund Husserl’s statement in *Die Krisis*:

Wir erspüren das gerade an unserem Europa. Es liegt darin etwas Einzigartiges, das auch allen anderen Menschheitsgruppen an uns empfindlich ist als etwas, das, abgesehen von allen Erwägungen der Nützlichkeit, ein Motiv für sie wird, sich im ungebrochenen Willen zu geistiger Selbsterhaltung doch immer zu europäisieren, während wir, wenn wir uns recht verstehen, uns zum Beispiel nie indianisieren werden.<sup>52</sup>

It is not surprising that Husserl detects in the “Europäisierung aller fremden Menschheiten” the “reign of an absolute sense” (“Walten eines absoluten Sinnes”), perceiving in it a definite breakthrough of a new epoch of mankind, the “Durchbruch und Entwicklungsanfang einer neuen Menschheitsepoche”<sup>53</sup>. Once more, we see the centripetal force of a “general history in cosmopolitan intention” as expressed in Goethe’s definitions of world literature and in Humboldt’s reflections on the expressions of world culture. As it was possible to write in 1978 that the specificity of Europe is based upon the fact “daß der Mensch als Mensch ein potentieller Europäer ist”<sup>54</sup>, we may easily understand in what sense the idea of cosmopolitanism and “Weltbürgertum” can be transformed if we don’t build it firmly on the ground of the experience of lack and fragmentation of the own, in spite of the ambivalence of these conceptions in Kant, Goethe, Humboldt or even Benjamin. But to give a supplementary sense to Husserl’s own words, it has become sensible and even evident to the non-European world—it is “allen anderen Menschheitsgruppen an uns empfindlich”—how necessary it is to develop today a new dimension of cosmopolitanism founded upon the experience of minorities (in the sense of Bhabha) and the “incompleteness” (Benjamin) of particular cultures, languages and forms of cultural expressions. In spite of many ambivalences and even contradictions, Alexander von Humboldt has contributed more than most of his contemporaries to the development and unfolding of these conceptions in theory and practice, with his writings and world-wide activities.

## The scientist as “Weltbürger”, the “Weltbürger” as scientist

In the context of an international symposium organized on the occasion of the bicentenary of Humboldt’s voyage, at the *House of World Cultures* at Berlin,<sup>55</sup> Nicolaas Rupke did raise the question whether the wide-spread reactions to the Humboldt jubilee in Germany could be linked with the fact that a “new” Germany, 54 years after the end of World War II and 10 years after the so-called “reunification”, needed new symbols and incarnations of cultural openness. Even if the experience of organizing congresses and other activities to honour Humboldt’s significance may have shown (to me as to others) that the willingness and preparedness especially of public institutions in Germany to consider a financial engagement were not so over-

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51 Krumpel, Heinz: *Die deutsche Philosophie in Mexiko. Ein Beitrag zur interkulturellen Verständigung seit Alexander von Humboldt*. Frankfurt am Main – Berlin – Bern: Peter Lang 1999, p. 51.

52 zit. in *ibid.*, p. 52.

53 Cited in *ibid.*

54 Walter Bröcker, cited in *ibid.*

55 The proceedings will soon be published in Spanish and German.

whelming as it may seem—and even the organizers of this congress on Humboldt may share some of these experiences—, this question, nevertheless, seems to be of great significance for our actual reception and attitude on behalf of this key figure not only of German culture. In fact, the Prussian writer and scientist is increasingly seen as cultural ambassador of a “better” Germany, something perfectly legitimate that needs further reflection.

In the last chapter (with its sceptical title “Asche und Lorbeer oder Was bleibt?”) of his recent biography, published in time for the Humboldt jubilee, Otto Krätz asked:

Woher aber kommt dann die trotzdem nicht nachlassende Faszination der Persönlichkeit Alexander von Humboldts?

Da ist einmal der Kosmopolit, der Weltbürger. Zwar war es in Humboldts Jugendzeit nichts Besonderes, Weltbürger—damals gleichbedeutend mit Europäer—zu sein; es entsprach den Bildungstraditionen des damaligen Adels. Humboldt blieb es jedoch auch—und zwar ganz bewußt—, als Europa im 19. Jahrhundert mehr und mehr in einem aggressiven Nationalismus versank.<sup>56</sup>

At the end of this interesting biography that proposes some accents in the Humboldt imagery but fails to make clear what constituted the “revolutionary” and the “Weltbürger”, the first reason for the ongoing fascination that is given to us is the general allusion to a cosmopolitanism that consciously ignored the growing nationalism in the 19th century, reminding us the fact that the numerous nazi attempts to instrumentalize the name and the prestige of Alexander von Humboldt always failed in the long run. The complexity of “Weltbürgertum” and “cosmopolitanism”, however, is much greater than the inflationary use of these labels tries to make us understand. It goes without saying that it saves the trouble of a self-reflection on behalf of our own history and situation in the context of the ongoing polylogue of world cultures. Humboldt’s example is neither analyzed nor questioned, so that it reduces the possibilities of understanding Humboldt’s thought as a valuable contribution to intercultural (and transcultural) questions today. Humboldt is transformed into the ideal of the open-minded European without rethinking “Weltbürgertum” and “cosmopolitanism” in late 18th and early 19th century in the context of European expansion. As was the case in the Federal and in the Democratic Republic of Germany after World War II, Alexander von Humboldt is simply transformed into the incarnation of a “better” Germany, readapting this role to the new contexts of intensified globalization and adding some updated ecological attributes.<sup>57</sup> We should try to analyze and focus critically upon some of these stereotypes in order to understand correctly Humboldt’s biographical, scientific and ideological evolution and career.

In the chapter dedicated to the scientific paradigms of Alexander von Humboldt and the “Humboldtians” who followed his path, Susan Faye Cannon, in her book on *Science in Culture: the Early Victorian Period* published in 1978, has underlined the cosmopolitan character of

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56 Krätz, Otto: *Alexander von Humboldt. Wissenschaftler – Weltbürger – Revolutionär*. Unter Mitarbeit von Sabine Kinder und Helga Merlin. München: Callwey 1997, pp. 187ff.

57 During the preparation of a projected poster exhibition directed by the German *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen* and the *Goethe-Institut*, the author of this text has been repeatedly required to present Alexander von Humboldt as a defender of human rights, promoter of an intercultural dialogue, of a holistic *Weltanschauung* and an ecological point of view. Critical reflections on some of these topics (and stereotypes) were not required.

the representatives of the conception and praxis of what she called *Humboldtian Science*.<sup>58</sup> Following Susan Cannon, this scientific paradigm was not based upon the invention of some of its parts by Humboldt but rather “in elevating the whole complex into the major concern of professional science for some forty years or so”<sup>59</sup>. Comments have been made about the fact that Cannon poorly developed her definition of “Humboldtian Science”. In a contribution to the already mentioned Humboldt symposium in Berlin, I have tried to redefine and describe the development of “Humboldtian Science” as transdisciplinary and intercultural at the same time.<sup>60</sup> Humboldt’s scientific conception is intercultural and not transcultural because it starts consciously from a European perspective. This point of view is evident from the very beginning of Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative* and is repeated, among other ways, by the appearance of the figure of a lonely (European) traveller. Humboldt’s aim was not a transcultural perspective oscillating between different cultural views and integrating insights proposed by different cultural positions, but an intercultural perspective based upon a consciousness of his own cultural traditions and even of their dominance. Nevertheless, the consciously chosen European perspective was built on the experience of the own as fragment, in Walter Benjamin’s sense as a broken piece of a perfect vessel. The experience of the whole as a completeness appeared to him as possible only through long series of translations and the knowledge of other cultures by continuous (hermeneutic) movements.

At the same time, Humboldt’s scientific conceptions are transdisciplinary and not interdisciplinary because—in opposition to an interdisciplinary approach—Humboldt does not define his knowledge and his scientific practice from a single disciplinary point (i. e., disciplines like botany or geognosy, mathematics, linguistics or historiography) from which he would try to enter the dialogue with other scientific specialities or “disciplined” zones of scientific knowledge. Alexander von Humboldt has always tried to “be at home”—as Goethe would put it—in different disciplines and, what is more, to move continuously between the different disciplines. Exclusive specialization would have meant *for him* a significant fragmentation of knowledge, allowing him only the study of one or two of the broken pieces. Humboldt wanted the vessel as a whole.

Cannon’s mention of the “cosmopolitan” character of *Humboldtian Science* could be described as the construction of a network between the different sciences *and* the different scientists. The spinning of this kind of *World Wide Web* could best be defined as a transdisciplinary and intercultural activity. His network of world-wide correspondents allowed him to accumulate an immense and specialized knowledge that he was able to present in all its complexity through transparent language in his characteristic *écriture*, a highly elaborated technique we could call *Humboldtian writing*.

The continuous evolution of his transdisciplinary approach can be observed in his early letters, his *Jugendbriefe* that can be read as *éducation scientifique*. On November 28, 1789, Humboldt tells Paul Usteri that mathematics “have been from the beginning my main occupation” so that the Swiss editor of the prestigious *Magazin für die Botanik* at Zürich should not be surprised

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58 Cannon, Susan Faye: *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period*. New York: Dawson and Science History Publications 1978, p. 105: “They are eagerly participating in the latest wave of international scientific activity: they are being cosmopolitan.”

59 *ibid.*, p. 77.

60 Cf. Ette, Ottmar: Eine “Gemütsverfassung moralischer Unruhe”. *Humboldtian Writing: Alexander von Humboldt und das Schreiben in der Moderne* (in print).

“wenn meine Arbeiten den Arbeiten eines Fremdlings in der Wissenschaft gleichen”<sup>61</sup>. Nevertheless, Humboldt sent some of his studies on botanic problems to Usteri, who published the writings of this so-called “stranger to science”. Obviously, there is a lot of coquettishness in the attitude of the twenty-year-old student at the University of Göttingen, in spite of the fact that Humboldt, in the year of the French Revolution, was already going to prepare perhaps not a revolutionary but nevertheless inestimable scientific conception and practice. More than a stranger who is “nowhere at home”—in the sense of one of the early definitions of “cosmopolite” or “Weltbürger”—, Alexander von Humboldt was a nomad of science, a traveller who connected the most diverse regions and cultures as well as the most different sciences. He was always fascinated by approaches trying to create complex combinations of different kinds of specialized knowledge. In the same letter to Usteri, he wrote:

es ist doch gewiß eine glückliche Idee, die Mineralogie mit der Botanik zu verbinden, und den Wohnort der Gewächse aufmerksam zu beobachten. Wer hat L[ichen] calcareus wohl je auf Thonschiefer, Cl[avaria] militaris anders als auf einer Raupenpuppe, Lycop[eridon] equinum Willd. anders als auf Pferdehuf gefunden? Wie viel wichtiges folgt hieraus für den Einfluß des Bodens auf die Natur oder das Ansehen des Gewächses?<sup>62</sup>

With an impressive perseverance and even a certain dash of obstinacy, Alexander von Humboldt has tried to develop this scientific program during more than seven decades until his last volume of his *Cosmos*, until his death. Even before his departure to the tropics, his letters insist upon his project “to do something excellent”; he always tried to enlarge his network of correspondents, including even scientists he personally disliked, giving this advice to his good friend Freiesleben: “Il faut prendre le diable par la queue.”<sup>63</sup> He continued internationalizing his scientific network, thereby becoming a scientific cosmopolitan (or cosmopolitan scientist) familiar with different national scientific systems and able to intervene in the filling of professional posts by manipulating the strings he had carefully woven. It was his incredible capacity for international communication (a heritage of the international *République des Lettres* in 18th century Europe) and much less the fact that the natural sciences needed data from all over the world—as the voyages of discovery or the Spanish expeditions in the *Virreinato*s in America may show—that made him (even in his small apartment in Potsdam Palace) one of the most influential cosmopolitans of science. We could never imagine Humboldt’s conception of science (or “Humboldtian science”) without his cosmopolitanism, his “Weltbürgertum”.

## Cosmopolitics and love

The creation of international and intercontinental relations has always been a favorite figure in the conception of “Humboldtian science” and even more in what we could designate as Humboldtian *cosmopolitics*. His cosmopolitics were not limited to a mere politics of science often signifying material and intellectual sponsorship; it included also a continuous activity as counsellor regarding the exploitation of mineral resources in Mexico or the realization of one of his favorite projects, an intercontinental channel in Central America. During his life, his aims always joined the project of modernity (as defined by Jürgen Habermas). The idea of exchange

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61 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Jugendbriefe*, *op.cit.*, p. 74.

62 *ibid.*

63 *ibid.*, p. 221.

and interchange, for Humboldt, was always connected with that of mutual interdependence and completion, of common progress and welfare, the creation of comparable existential conditions on our planet. The improving of material and intellectual infrastructure was a key to global thinking aware of its potential (but perhaps not its consequences) for world trade and world traffic as well as for a future world culture and world politics. The multilingualism of his writing and thinking is omnipresent in his American diaries or in his letters and publications in different languages. We can still feel the lack of detailed studies concerning the intense relationship between his French and German books: for example, between his *Ansichten der Natur* and his *Tableaux de la Nature*. These studies could perhaps make us understand why Humboldt sometimes gave an extreme importance to his own (and other) translations, and sometimes not at all. His multilingualism is impressive even today<sup>64</sup> although it should not be over-estimated concerning his active linguistic competence. It proves his life-long intention to find new ways through a recently globalized Babel and to make contacts not only with languages but much more with cultures and human beings. His linguistic competence gives us a testimony of his global citizenship. As in other parts of human culture, Humboldt was always fascinated by the interplay of identities and differences in and between the languages of the world.

Humboldt's cosmopolitics are a European politics in global perspective, in Voltaire's sense based upon the firm hope that world-wide relations, in the long run, will have positive consequences not only for the Europeans but for mankind as a whole. We should not forget that this *citoyen de l'univers* had his own views (different from Kant's conceptions) on the "Idea of a general history in cosmopolitan intention" that he pursued with perseverance. His universal history where he was an infatigable traveller was not based upon the foundation of national or supra-national institutions. It is embedded in Nature, in a cosmic (and not simply geographic) order without de-historizing the processes of *Weltgeschichte*. This order forms the constantly widened foundation for Humboldt's constantly growing project of a modernity where he did not overlook the importance of national structures. This project is manifest in his vision of Nature and its technical domination by and for mankind as well as in the horizon of individual and collective identity, already present in his *Jugendbriefe* and his American diaries, a question that Humboldt saw from the background of a conflictive and even failed nation building process that leads him to a perspicacious analysis of economic, social, ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of the proto-national regions of the Spanish colonies in America. The nestling of social phenomena in the more fundamental phenomena of Nature allows him—during the collapse of the Prussian state—to write a preface to the first edition of his *Ansichten der Natur* where the study of Nature was not a mere evasion but a more elevated activity finding its expression in a final quotation of Schiller's *Die Braut von Messina*<sup>65</sup>. In the face of wars and

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64 For a detailed study cf. Biermann, Kurt-R./Schwarz, Ingo: Der polyglotte Alexander von Humboldt. In: Alexander von Humboldt Magazin (Bonn) 69 (1997), pp. 39–44.

65 Cf. the last paragraph of his preface: "Ueberall habe ich auf den ewigen Einfluss hingewiesen, welche die physische Natur auf die moralische Stimmung der Menschheit und auf ihre Schicksale ausübt. Bedrängten Gemüthern sind diese Blätter vorzugsweise gewidmet. "Wer sich herausgerettet aus der stürmischen Lebenswelle", folgt mir gern in das Dickigt der Wälder, durch die unabhsehbare Steppe und auf den hohen Rücken der Andeskette. Zu ihm spricht der weltrichtende Chor: Auf den Bergen ist Freyheit! Der Hauch der Grüfte Steigt nicht hinauf in die reinen Lüfte, Die Welt ist vollkommen überall Wo der Mensch nicht hinkommt mit seiner Qual."

destructions caused by national powers, Nature appears as the reign of true freedom where the human being (“der denkende Mensch”) can find his way back to a secularized cosmic order. Without forgetting national conflicts and developments, Humboldt was mainly interested in the study and presentation of world-wide phenomena and relations that must have surprised his readership when he uncovered—with a gesture of social criticism and a sceptical accent to his view of progress—the strangeness of the own. Right in the middle of his critical remarks on the situation of the indigenous population and peasantry in later Mexico, he wrote in his *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne*:

Un vrai perfectionnement des institutions sociales dépend sans doute des lumières et du développement intellectuel; mais l'enchaînement des ressorts qui meuvent un état est tel que, dans une partie de la nation, ce développement peut faire des progrès très marquants, sans que la situation des dernières classes en devienne plus heureuse. Presque tout le nord de l'Europe nous confirme cette triste expérience: il y existe des pays dans lesquels, malgré la civilisation vantée des hautes classes de la société, le cultivateur vit encore aujourd'hui dans le même avilissement sous lequel il gémissait trois ou quatre siècles plus tôt. Nous trouverions peut-être le sort des Indiens plus heureux, si nous les comparions à celui des paysans de la Courlande, de la Russie et d'une grande partie de l'Allemagne septentrionale.<sup>66</sup>

In her analysis of the relationship between the strange and the own and, even more, of the strange in the own, Julia Kristeva, the Paris-based literary critic and cultural critic born in Bulgaria, proposed a formula that looks simple only at first glance: “Soyons de nulle part, donc, mais sans oublier que nous sommes quelque part [...]”<sup>67</sup> Humboldt’s cosmopolitics always tried to mediate scientifically and socially the interplay of differences and identities, between the same and the other, the strange and the own without ever forgetting its own place. In the aporetic dimension of his enterprise and, even more, the limitations by the contemporary contexts, it would be possible, of course, to speak of a failure of his cosmopolitan project of modernity. The price Alexander von Humboldt—a prominent figure at the Prussian Court and cultivating his “inner world” at the same time—had to pay for his cosmopolitan intentions was high. It consisted, for example, in the paradox that one of the most prestigious and internationally admired scientists, in intense communication with the whole world, was in Prussia and Germany a man who, in more than one sense, was a lonely and increasingly isolated figure. The student at Frankfurt on Oder (“ein trauriger Ort”) who had told his friends in Berlin that “a little bit of philosophy makes us understand that the human being is made for every part of the world, even for the frosty banks of the river Oder”<sup>68</sup>, the young man who later, like no other German, became the protagonist of intense material and intellectual travels, wrote to his former teacher, Joachim Heinrich Campe, on May 17, 1792, explaining that he had created his own “interior world” (“innere Welt”) where “one can live an active and happy life”<sup>69</sup>. This interior world whose creation would have been impossible without Humboldt’s passionate disciplinary actions upon himself, was the *conditio sine qua non* for his projection of the exterior world. It may not have been pure chance that made him write, in the same letter, the formula he always

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66 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Ansichten der Natur*, *op.cit.*, pp. VII ff.

67 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne*. Bd. I. Paris: Chez F. Schoell 1811, p. 421.

68 Kristeva, Julia: *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, *op.cit.*, p. 171.

69 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Jugendbriefe*, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

dedicated to his best and intimate friends, reminding them of the “happiest hours” spent together, adapting it now to another object the lonely “Weltbürger” never stopped loving:

Das Studium der Natur füllt meine ganze Muße aus, es gewährt ein so reines Vergnügen, dem ich kein anderes gleichzuschätzen weis, an das sich jedes moralische Gefühl ankettet und das mir die glücklichsten Stunden meines Lebens geschenkt hat.<sup>70</sup>

*Translated by Katharina Vester.*

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70 *ibid.*, p. 188.