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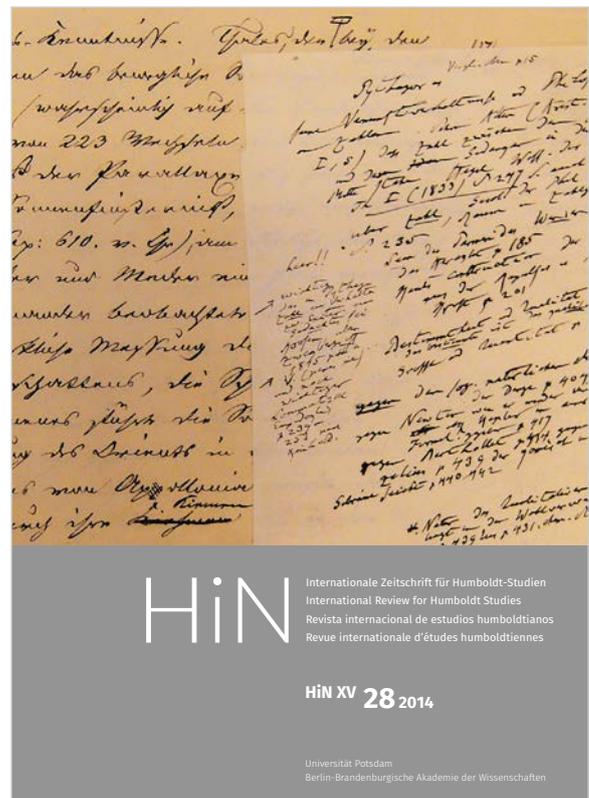
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# Luiz Estevam O. Fernandes

## *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain:* Humboldt and the history of Mexico<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

In this paper we discuss how Alexander von Humboldt conceived a past to New Spain in his *Political Essay on New Spain* (1811) and how this text was, in turn, appropriated by the Mexican historiography during the 19th century.

In order to do so, we analyze how the Prussian drew from American sources, particularly from the text of the Jesuit Francisco Javier Clavijero, written shortly before. We also study Humboldt's conceptions of text and of history, highlighting the place of the indigenous in the composition of his reasoning. Finally, we give examples of how the Mexican nationalist historiography read and reinterpreted the *Political Essay*.

### **Resumen**

En este artículo se discute cómo Alexander von Humboldt concibió un pasado a la Nueva España en su *Ensayo político sobre el reino de la Nueva España* (1811) y cómo este texto, a su vez, fue apropiado por la historiografía mexicana durante el siglo XIX.

Para ello, se analiza cómo el prusiano se ha valido de fuentes americanas, sobre todo a partir del texto del jesuita Francisco Javier Clavijero, escrito poco antes. También estudiamos las concepciones de texto y de la historia de Humboldt, destacando el lugar de los indígenas en la composición de su razonamiento. Por último, damos ejemplos de cómo la historiografía nacionalista mexicana leyó y reinterpreto el *Ensayo político*.

### **Résumé**

Cet article explique comment Alexander von Humboldt a conçu une passé pour la Nouvelle-Espagne dans son *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne* (1811) et la façon que ce texte, à son tour, a été approprié par l'historiographie mexicaine au cours du XIXe siècle.

Ainsi, nous analysons comment le prussien a utilisé des sources américaines, en particulier le texte du jésuite Francisco Javier Clavijero, écrit un peu de temps avant. Nous étudions également les conceptions de texte et de l'histoire de Humboldt, en soulignant la place des indigènes dans la composition de son raisonnement. Enfin, nous donnons des exemples de la façon dont l'historiographie nationaliste mexicain a lu et a réinterprété l'Essai politique.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the arguments in this text were previously published in my book *Patria Mestiza. A invenção do passado nacional mexicano (séculos XVIII e XIX)*. Jundiá Paco Editorial, 2012. I have also presented some of the results contained in this work on the VII Brazilian Seminar on Theory and History of Historiography in a round table about Humboldt that I shared with Vera Kutzinski, in August 2013. I must acknowledge the contribution that this work received from Kutzinski and from the seminar's audience who had presented me with some defiance questions that helped me in my argument. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviser of this article, who also pointed arguments that could be enhanced. Nevertheless, the ideas here expressed are of my own responsibility.

When Friedrich Heinrich Alexander, the Baron of Humboldt arrived in America, he was 30 years old. It was the year of 1799. Aboard the ship *Pizarro*, he carried powerful recommendation letters from the King of Spain that would open his way into the New World. Parting from Lima, he crossed the Americas, and arrived in New Spain in 1803, where he remained for almost a year. During his stay Humboldt analyzed the so-called "Mexican antiques" in an unusual manner to local scholars. With his works, he provided evidences to the proud creoles that their land was historically rich and their subsoil was as valuable as they had always figured. Humboldt has left the *Tablas geográfico políticas del reino de Nueva España* (1804), regarding statistical data compiled during his researches, to the New Spain bureaucracy, written in Spanish, as a token of his consideration for their aid and support throughout his stay in New Spain. After his departure, he became a symbol of science and progress and, because of his work, there were statues risen in his name and his memory was praised as the creator of the "true" image of Mexico.

It was especially the publication of *Vue des Cordillères et monumens des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (1810) and, in special, *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle Espagne* (1811) that rendered him great fame in Mexican land. The latter work has been untiringly reprinted, translated and quoted in America and Europe, ever since its first publication, demonstrating the great interest roused by this work. As the prologue of the first edition reveals, Humboldt himself had written the book in order to produce a useful work for the people in charge of colonial government and administration, who lacked reliable numbers to rule, in spite of hundreds of years of Spanish presence in the lands of New Spain "Even the Spanish government honored my researches with a particular attention; and they have furnished materials for several official papers on the interests of the commerce and manufacturing industry of the colonies", affirmed the Prussian intellectual (Humboldt 1966, 27).

After the Mexican independence his work continued to find political use "Mr. Humboldt's Political Essay comprises the most complete and most accurate description of the natural wealth of the country, and that the reading of this great work has done much to revive the industrial activity of the nation, and to inspire confidence in its own strength"; revealed the Executive Power of Mexico in a solemn public act on July 21, 1824 (In Fernandes 2012, 280). Until researches from the late nineteenth century, the data contained in *Political Essay...*, obtained from creole sources were widely used by the growing Mexican government in all positions related to land expansion, mines and "races" in the country. Enrique Florescano reminds us that the first modern image made of New Spain appeared with the beginning of the independence movement, and because it was conceived in a Creole environment with Creole information

it became the most widely read and quoted book in nineteenth century Mexico (Florescano 2001, 512).

## Humboldt: a reader of Mexican History

None of the referred works is precisely a history book or a chronicle. The *Political Essay...* is, above all, a report on the extent, composition, soil, wealth and people of New Spain as a result from Humboldt's researches in 1803. The few proper historical considerations contained herein are in this sense, justified. In his chapter on the diversity of casts it is possible to have an idea of the vision the traveler had on the indigenous history and realize that, in some extents, there are striking similarities between the writings of Humboldt and those of Francisco Javier Clavijero, despite the differences both in structure and nature.

Before comparing the authors and understanding how Humboldt has appropriated the works of the Mexican Jesuit, let us make a brief introduction about the Jesuit. Francisco Javier Clavijero Echegaray was born in Veracruz on September 9, 1731. He was the child of a Spanish father and Creole mother and died in Bologna on April 2, 1787. Clavijero had a wandering life, frequently moving from one place to another due to his father's work in administrative positions of the Spanish Crown. In the initial years, his education was alternated between Puebla and Tepoztlan where he became a skilled reader in multiple languages. Transferred to the capital of New Spain, Clavijero was joined with other students who would also leave their footprints in posterity, such as Andrés Cavo and Francisco Javier Alegre<sup>1</sup>. He was ordained a Jesuit in 1755 and soon assumed a teaching position at the *Colegio de San Gregorio*. During his years in the capital, Clavijero collected and analyzed both pre-colonial indigenous materials and texts from the early colonial centuries, especially the collection of manuscripts and antiques of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, donated to the *Colegio de San Pedro y San Pablo*, upon the erudite's death.

Transferred to Puebla, Valladolid and Guadalajara, he went on as a philosophy professor in the following

1 "These men represented in the New World what may rightly be called the "Christian Enlightenment", which had already developed in Spain - well exemplified by Feijóo, for instance - and in other Catholic countries of Europe. Following in the footsteps of their European counterparts, they clearly perceived the intrinsic value of the new learning and realized that the future welfare of the Church - and that of the Jesuit Order - demanded their coming to terms with modern thought insofar as it did not conflict with Catholic teaching and tradition. From their perspective, this had to be done on the basis of solid intellectual foundations if they were to win the sympathy and allegiance of rational men" (Dominguez 2006, 101)

years. When the Jesuits were expelled from the Spanish domains under the order of King Carlos III in 1767, Clavijero left New Spain and was exiled in Ferrara, Italy, but soon relocated to Bologna, where he would spend the last years of his life. Deprived of the materials he had collected and studied in the capital of New Spain, but based in a favorable environment to a humanist like him, Clavijero had access to the work of Cornelius de Pauw about human nature of the Americans. Shocked by the content of De Pauw's work, which he considered depreciatory and full of what he called "ignorance of the American continent", he put himself to the writing of *La Historia Antigua de México*. In this work he debated with the Prussian philosopher and other Europeans, and spurred his work to show what he considered to be the "true" image of ancient Mexico.

The work was received with some criticism from those who Clavijero himself had at first criticized and from other Jesuits exiled in Italy. If the work of Clavijero had an ambiguous reception at first, possibly more criticized than praised, in the late eighteenth century it would find its glory<sup>2</sup>. In the *Political Essay...*, Humboldt qualified Clavijero as a wise historian and repeatedly availed himself of his observations.

With all this in mind, we may go back to the comparison between Humboldt and his privileged historical source. Both Clavijero and Humboldt considered that the Indians had all very similar physical shape. The Ignatian, who discussed with minutiae about the past of their land, listed the distinctions between the Spanish civilization (at the time of the Phoenician invasion) and the Aztec civilization (at the time of the Iberian arrival), also wrote "the physical and moral constitution of Mexicans, their genius and inclinations were the same as the *acolhuas*, the *Tlaxcalans*, the *tepanecas* and other nations, and there was no other difference other than the one that is produced by a different education" (Clavijero 1964, pp. 61-62). This same relationship with the alterity, that seems to us as strange as affirming that a German and a Spaniard are equal because they are white, was based on skin color, hair, eyes, and physical complexion. This organized a rigid cast system (*Sistema de Castas*), founded on multi-secular traditions of *Limpieza de Sangre*<sup>3</sup>. Some of the considerations made by Humboldt went in the same direction

2 On the reception of Clavijero, see Trabulse 1975 and Cañizares-Esguerra 2001 (pp. 115-120).

3 Clavijero even considers the (female) Indians to be more beautiful the whiter they are: "su semblante ni atrae ni ofende; pero en las jóvenes del otro sexo se ven muchas blancas y de singular belleza, a la cual dan mayor realce la dulzura de su voz, la suavidad de su genio y la natural modestia de su semblante" (Clavijero 1964, p. 62).

«Les Indiens de la Nouvelle-Espagne ressemblent en général à ceux qui habitent le Canada et la Floride, le Pérou et le Brésil: même couleur basanée et cuivrée, cheveux plats et lisses, peu de barbe, le corps trapu, l'œil allongé, ayant le coin dirigé par en haut vers les tempes, les pommettes saillantes, les lèvres larges, dans la bouche une expression de douceur qui contraste avec un regard sonribe et sévère". (Humboldt 1811, II, p. 381)

Other similarities between the authors resulted from views skewed by the tradition of placing the indigenous populations at the lowest point of the social rank "certainly there is no people in that kingdom that works more, or whose work is most useful or most needed" affirmed Clavijero (1964, p.64), revealing the place occupied by the Indians in the late eighteenth century. Humboldt, on the other hand, had a more sophisticated thinking, intending that all men were equal in rights, not only in Creation.

When considering the past, Humboldt understood that the Indians, especially the Aztecs and Toltecs, were civilized and therefore, separated from the others (including the living Indians in the early nineteenth century). Between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, according to Humboldt, warring nations from the north invaded Anahuac and forced the existing civilizations to agglomerate in the direction of Guatemala. Even so, these nations would have managed to overcome the adversities, maintaining an elevated degree of civilization and development in the following centuries (Humboldt 1811, II, cap.VI).

This distinction between civilized and barbarian in Humboldt did not mean that there was no gradation between these poles. Even the most civilized Aztec or the more polished of the Toltecs would not be a match to the stage of civilization in which Europe was found in 1803.

One might think that Humboldt did so to assert the European superiority over the New World. In doing so, he would differ very little from the chronicle tradition or writings such as those by Robertson and Buffon. Antonello Gerbi even considers the extensive work of Humboldt on America almost as an anomalous and "somewhat marginal" contribution in the dispute of the New World (1955, p.411). Other authors like Mary Louise Pratt handle the traveler's writings and the Debate as "an intersecting phenomena shaped by shared European preoccupations and anxieties with respect to the Americas" (Pratt 1999, p. 212). Thus, it is not at all unreasonable in neither the meaning given by Gerbi or Pratt, to think of Humboldt as another European in the long list of detractors of the New World. Let us take a pause then to think about the concepts of civilization and barbarism proposed by Humboldt and test whether those assertions are correct.

In early nineteenth century Europe the use of the term “civilization” led to a new form of writing history, “in which men were less defined in terms of a rational animal (in the Aristotelian meaning) and more as perfectible animals”. *Civilization* had been associated to *progress* since the days of Clavijero and this semantic convergence had created the acception of *civilization* as an *evolution* in the march of humanity towards the continuous perfection of man in society. A perfection measured in terms of technical progress, economic development, and refinement of manners (Svampa 1994).

In a similar, but not equal manner, Humboldt kept two of the main treats of the German historicism (valorization of the individuality of man, of people and of historical experiences and the conception of a historical development endowed with dynamism and freedom) and a recognition of individuality as a category intrinsic to all historical being, distancing from the quantitative meaning of evolution, addressing it as the understanding of the historical movement as a maturation of singularities. This means that Humboldt saw humanity as a huge family inhabiting the same planet and that all its continents were the same age.

Still, as Vera Kutzinski and Otmar Ette have warned us, “he still placed individual members of this large human family at different points in the developmental spectrum that ranges from barbarism to civilization, especially when referring to the indigenous habits, mainly when associated with human sacrifices” (2012, XXV-XXVI). Imbued with contemporary Anglo-Saxon proposals of degrees among civilizations, barbarians and savages, Humboldt foresaw different nuances among the various human groups. It is therefore possible to understand why the traveler had offered a relativistic response to the detractors of America, as Clavijero had done

Un peuple qui régloit ses fêtes d’après le mouvement des astres, et qui gravoit ses fastes sur un monument public, étoit parvenu sans doute à un degré de civilisation supérieur à celui que lui ont assigné Pauw, Raynal, et même Robertson, le plus judicieux des historiens de l’Amérique. Ces auteurs regardent comme barbare tout état de l’homme qui s’éloigne du type de culture qu’ils se sont formé d’après leurs idées systématiques. Nous ne saurions admettre des distinctions tranchantes en nations barbares et nations civilisées (Humboldt 1813, s194).

Having in mind these nuances between civilization and barbarism, it becomes clear that the role played by Humboldt in the Controversy of the New World is much richer, exactly for the way he hued the ideas of the most read European authors at the time and with his universalist and neo-humanist vision he endorsed criticized authors as Clavijero. It seems that Humboldt was not a

mere disciple of the so-called myth of the Western Civilization, based on a European matrix. Although he never distanced from the idea of Europe as the pinnacle of historical, cultural, political and economic development, he never ceased to call “attention to the barbarity within civilization itself, notably to the barbaric aspects of so-called western civilization, in full awareness that presumably gentle and peaceful Christianity got along rather well with colonialism and slavery in his day. He distanced himself from these implications of the civilizational process, adopting a critical attitude toward the myth of Western progress” (Kutzinski and Ette, 2012, XXVI).

But there is another notion from Pratt’s important book that seems more inspiring. At least at a first glance. She affirms that Humboldt’s main concern was his conception of the Cosmos. In his categorizing eagerness, he would have magnified the American nature, virtually erasing the human element from it, “so engulfed and miniaturized was the human in Humboldt’s cosmic conception that the narrative ceased to be a viable mode of representation” (Pratt 1999, p.213). The European erudite had updated the amazement felt by the first chroniclers, especially Colombo, as if three centuries of colonization had not passed between them. This is the very thesis proposed by Pratt. According to her, Humboldt would have reinvented the “New World”, reinforcing this designation 300 years after its discovery by Columbus.

It might be precipitated to settle on the conclusion of the reinvention of the New World, since in some of his writings Humboldt denies that America was geologically younger than Europe. On the other hand, in the *Political Essay...* he presents a technical and analytical writing, with little or no narrative, and in contrast, very descriptive, with many tables and graphs. The Prussian was received in the homes of wealthy creole farmers, and countless employees and technicians always accompanied him in his travels. He visited cities and universities, but he subdued the human element in his text to highlight a vast “virgin land”.

The fact that Humboldt did not center his analysis on the human element does not mean he didn’t consider it. The manner in which he took it into account, however, did not always place this human element at the starting point. In most cases subordinated to nature or perceived from their monuments and material culture, the Human appeared as another object of intellectual scrutiny. Humboldt didn’t use the narrative mode

4 Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra affirmed that, “Humboldt bequeathed to his followers a view of tropical landscapes as spaces to study biodistribution, full of diverse plant and animal populations, but empty of humans” (2006 p. 137).

to describe that Not-so-New World as other authors did before him. He didn't have much to narrate, but a lot to analyze. In this sense, Men in the *Political Essay...* were always related to quantifiable scientific data and statistics, connected to issues such as working force or curious comparisons in linguistics and customs. Narrating was more of a historian. Describing or analyzing more of a scientist. When referring to History, almost invariably Humboldt used the *Historia Antigua de Mexico* by Clavijero as his main reference, or texts by other authorities of the same stature, such as the Franciscan Juan de Torquemada (1615) who was still very popular among the scholars of "Indian antiques" in the early nineteenth century.

There are numerous descriptions, analyses and theses on many Indian monuments and ancient buildings. Even in the past the human actions mattered more as a means to understand the changes in nature than for its own values. Years later, this kind of emptying the stage from the human element and making Nature the main character was appropriated in a peculiar way.

Humboldt was used by the Mexican liberalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to theoretically justify the exploitation of the rich territory measured by the Prussian erudite, its socio-economic boundaries, and the domain over an "empty" land. Despite its correction by new researches, Humboldt's data continued to be used. The researcher endorsed the creole idea of a great and mighty Mexico that would later become sovereign and independent. As he put together all his ponderations on New Spain in a book, Humboldt drew a comprehensive picture of a vast territory, which hitherto lacked an eloquent framework demonstrating its size and economic potential (Florescano 2001, 512).

Moreover, the tradition we identified in Clavijero and Humboldt, of "civilizing" the Aztecs and magnifying their achievements, despite their genetic "flaws" such as the tradition of making sacrifices, continued unabated in the years following the Mexican independence. In 1813, among the heat of the disputes for political emancipation, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier also contributed to the debate on the degree of civilization of the Indian people. Devoted to enhancing his homeland and in the will to watch it set free from the metropolitan oppression, this religious made use of a curious discursive inversion. In his text Mier idealized the Aztec world almost as an Edenic place. To this world he countered the European practice of African slavery, the miseries caused by the commercial wars and the high suicide rate in the Old Continent.

## The Mexican past and the Indians in the Political Essay...

The glorious past of the Mexican nation was to be found and narrated from the Aztec history and its protagonists were men to that should have their fame revealed. As Europe had an ancient history of civilizations, so did America, particularly Mexico. Nature should serve Men, as in Clavijero's text (or even before it). At the same time, the notion of progress and the pursuit of secular laws that would govern the scientific universe can be claimed as legacies of Humboldt's thought and his congeners. It is also Prussian the idea that together with the description of men, it is equally important to highlight the description of monuments and buildings as a pioneer. Humboldt was responsible for the first examination of the "indigenous antiques" comparing the monoliths and ruins of ancient American civilizations with those of ancient Asia. A lesson was learnt from his studies of the Amerindian monuments "only through the study of the ancient monuments the truth is to be found" (Chavero 1984 [1884], LVII).

Leaning on the writings of the author from Veracruz and other studies from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Humboldt affirmed with no surprise that the Aztecs would have a primitive origin in northern Asia<sup>5</sup>. From American lands, parting from Aztlán, in the northern Gila River they would have settled in the *cordilleras* after extensive southern migrations, preferring "these cold regions to the excessive heat of the coast" (Humboldt 1811, II, 316). The author continues his argument, comparing the Aztecs in their migration to the European barbarian tribes, Ostrogoths and Alami, that also migrated inside Europe and concludes, by analogy, that the migratory process itself and its causes and consequences (e.g. poor conditions in the original area, the semi-nomad state that those tribes had endured etc.) could be transposed to the New World. He doesn't state the original location of the Goths, but, in the *Political Essay...*, Humboldt continued to use a quite old idea that Mexican Indians were of Asian origin. His uniqueness, however, lies in the fact that he was the first author to achieve critical fortune to do it without using a biblical, but a scientific premise.

He also used and abused of other analogies and parallelisms. Nevertheless, he did not incorporate the new-Hispanic and creole tradition of representing the Indian as the American roman. Certainly, he knew that the *criollos* had a long tradition in this kind of comparison, being a well-versed reader of Clavijero and other chroniclers. That old tradition went back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where writers often compared the indigenous past to the Classical antiquity or to the biblical story of Creation in order to insert the natives

<sup>5</sup> Lorenzana, for example, had already sustained this argument in 1770.

in the same humankind created by God and ruled by the same Habsburg monarchs. This kind of comparison was also made to link the Indians past to the New Spain History, setting Cortés as the junction component, as a needed historical connection between their present times to the ancient Anahuac foundation.

Whether they were Indians or *mestizos* writers, willing to acquire rights and emoluments as vassals or Catholic's neophytes, whether they were *criollos* assimilating the territory past to themselves, developing a patriotic sense of pride, the pagan past reinterpretation followed some European model. The same rhetorical manner that was present in all chronicles described Aztecs, Romans, Greeks or Mayas. This formula would say that some nations, in their past, inhabited large cities, where they kept a well civilized life. Pagans, nevertheless, they merely poise themselves between great and admirable technical, bellicose, literary and philosophical achievements, and their inevitable sins derived from their idolatrous and polytheist practices. Those same nations, of highly civilizational level, such as the Greeks, Romans, Carthaginians or Egyptians, were living in demonical superstitions that would, inexorably, lead them to ruin and decay.

Some authors (Brading 1985, 37-42; Basave Benítez 1992, 18-20) argue that this comparison between the Aztecs past and the Greek-roman past made by some *criollos* was a discursive solution created to claim the Aztec past to themselves. Adopting that splendid indigenous past (whereas there was no one else to do it) was a form to detach the *criollos* from the living Indian misery and poorness as well as from the mestizo bastardy. Others (Rubial García, 2002, p. 88) argue that *criollos* indeed proclaimed the greatness of Aztecs past, but without taking this past as their own: as they compared the natives past to the roman past, the *criollos* were trying to set themselves apart from discrimination and to build prestigious images. The pre-Hispanic past was not their past, but means to give their native soil a proud past since born-Europeans used to say that nothing good came from America (specially from American past).

Anyhow, a huge shift took place in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the American continent, there was a knowledge re-articulation that led to the production of new forms of historical interpretation. It was not exactly a revolution in thinking. With Clavijero in particular, the architecture of the discourse on indigenous past did not innovated at all in terms of comparing Indians of Mexico to the classical antiquity, especially to the Romans. To the Jesuit, there was no questioning about the assimilation of the indigenous past as well as the European past, so there was no reason to doubt an equally glorious gift inherited by the *criollos* of both grand tradition. Basically, it was a reworking of the Cath-

olic interpretation of hierarchy and division of history and humanity.

In Europe, the work of Cornelius de Pauw provoked a response from various *criollos* writers, of which Clavijero just gaining prominence in Mexican memory. In the sense that Cañizares-Esguerra gave to the expression "philosophical traveler", *Les Recherches sur les américains philosophiques* inaugurated a genre of philosophical compilation of travel narratives, which led to later works such as the ones written by Raynal, Adam Smith, William Robertson and Alexander von Humboldt. What united those writers, when they argued about America and its History, was the fact that they used, as criteria to establish the truth, an internal critique of the logic of their sources arguments.

Humboldt was a notorious exception, since the foundation of this new critique was consisted largely in demonstrating the internal contradictions of the vast majority of the Spanish and Spanish-American chronicles. "Philosophical travelers" often displayed the Spanish chroniclers as ignorant, easily duped by superficial similarities between the Amerindian societies and classical past. How was it possible that societies without writing, unaware of the wheel and iron, accustomed to bloody human sacrifices to the gods, could develop such exquisite forms of government and police as those of the ancient Greeks and Romans?, they asked.

In other words, we have stated that in the tradition of the chronicle, the Indians were portrayed through analogies with the classical past, representing the Mexico and Inca societies, for instance, as virtuous systems of government emulating Rome, but also as representatives of evil and inverted versions of Christianity. In the eighteenth century, this form of historiography began to be questioned, and such reports were considered fruit of the imagination of superstitious monks, ignorant Spanish soldiers or *mestizos* reproducing ideas of their religious teachers: thus, how could those sources contain any truth?

The disrepute in which the old chronicles fell was broken with the work of Humboldt. The Prussian appreciated the "infamous" Spanish or Spanish-American old chronicles as a source of verisimilitude in his text: after all, even with all the confusion that the Spaniards could have done in America, they would have been able to glimpse something of the reality. That's because, for Humboldt, the ignorance of the observers guaranteed the credibility of some parts of their testimony (Cañizares-Esguerra: 2007, p. 38-39). It was just a matter of reading them well and testing their statements to scientific modern trials.

Therefore, although he knew that Clavijero and others often compared Aztecs to Romans and that his col-

leagues in Europe despised this comparison asseverating that this was nonsense, several of Humboldt works speaks about the use of analogies as a highly valid method of scientific knowledge, although he is clear that it should not be used for civilizations in different degree of development. Instead of the classic perspective, Humboldt's foreign look that always pursued comparisons, proposed a clear analogy between the invasions suffered by Anahuac between the seventh and thirteenth centuries and the barbarian invasions in the Roman Europe during the fifth century, even though this was one of the few times he confirmed this tradition instead of neglecting it. Rudimentary, but warrior nations had destroyed the flower of refinement in both civilizations Roman and Anahuac. Nonetheless, unlike what happened in Europe, the meso-American civilizations persisted after the invasions. Agriculture, the great pyramids, metal melting, perfect stone cutting, besides the hieroglyphs and a solar year "more perfect than that of the Greeks and Romans" could be found in Mexico and among the Toltecs, despite the barbarian ravages.

Even when he made compliments to the Aztec society, his most perfect and constant parallel to describe that civilization were the ancient oriental theocracies, which the liberal Humboldt had no approval of. To show his displeasure towards the despotic forms of power under which Mexican Indians were upon the arrival of the Spaniards, the author wrote:

ils [*the spaniards*] trouvèrent déjà le peuple dans cet état d'abjection et de pauvreté qui accompagne partout le despotisme et la féodalité. L'empereur, les princes, la noblesse et le clergé (les *teopixquis*) possédoient seuls les terres les plus fertiles; les gouverneurs de province se permettoient impunément les exactions les plus graves; le cultivateur étoit avili. Les grands chemins, comme nous l'avons observé plus haut, fourmilloient de mendiants; le manque de grands quadrupèdes domestiques forçoit des milliers d'Indiens à faire le métier des bêtes de somme et à servir pour le transport du maïs, du coton, des peaux et d'autres denrées que le provinces les plus éloignées envoient comme tribut à la capitale. (Humboldt 1811, II, 424)

Although in *Vues des Cordillères* Humboldt reinforced that only through the study of the uniqueness of the people it was possible to understand them, he emphasized that the right comparison between Indian's past was with the Eastern nations.

Humboldt also condemned the action of the conquerors, accusing them of caring for nothing else than precious metals. Cruel and greedy men, the author arguments in the same way hundreds did before him, in a "Black legend" tradition, the Spaniards had promoted

a massacre, denounced and curbed by a handful of eloquent, elegant and good men, such as Las Casas. Humboldt, therefore, was intrigued by the fact that millions of Indians had survived in the nineteenth century. Considering the immense vicissitudes suffered by those people, it was a true miracle that they were still alive.

Here we can observe his humanist piety for those people submitted to injustices. On the other hand, this piousness gave them a characteristic passiveness. Humboldt's vision of History was liberal and Eurocentric and presupposed a scale of civilization that placed America and the Orient very closely. In this sense they were parted from Europe in the human march towards freedom. Accordingly, he certainly disagreed with the colonial system, or at least, prescribed it administrative changes. Humboldt was read and interpreted endorsing even greater ambitions, clearly engaged with the independence movements, for his work had showed the greatness of the colonies in terms of population, mineral production and manufacturing. Humboldt's researches appeared in the official texts of the independent governments, but even before that, they might have based the arguments of pro-independence writers like Mier, who cited him a dozens times, always reinforcing his authority and magnanimity of his numbers<sup>6</sup>.

The ambiguities in Humboldt's writings show up in passages such as "Cette aptitude [*the ability Indians had on copying thing*] deviendra un jour très-précieuse, lorsque les manufactures prendront de l'essor dans un pays où il reste tout à créer à un gouvernement régénérateur (Humboldt 1811, II, 416)". Who was the "regenerator" here? An efficient Spanish administrator? Or a creole government? Each side interpreted as it wished. Years later the ardor with which Humboldt's memory was preserved still echoed in dozens of geopolitical designations (cities, counties, universities and roads) that were named after him, or in passages such as in the prologue of the Chilean edition of the *Political Essay...*, 1942 "in fact, it results somewhat strange that a man so distant from America, ended up belonging to us, so at-

6 Covarrubias argues that it was natural that most of the scholars who read Humboldt and regularly quoted in the first half of the nineteenth century were very interested politicians or official bureaucracy interest in public infrastructure projects. Mier, Lorenzo de Zavala, José María Luis Mora, Carlos Bustamante, Mariano Otero, Lucas Alamán and several other historians and essayists of that time considered Humboldt a "Scientific hero". Towards the second half of the nineteenth century, Covarrubias correctly argues, a significant change occurred in the reception of the work and the person of Humboldt. This change occurred in two ways: 1) an increase in knowledge of the works written by him, gave 2) the appreciation that the test had transformed. Optimistically, he became the "poker of Mexican historical consciousness" in a liberal reading of all his works; the other way round, he had failed as the "prophet of economic welfare" in a more conservative reading. Cf. Covarrubias 2009.

tached to the most medullar of the continent" (Sanchez 1942, 7).

Concerning the living natives, Humboldt was clear about his liberal ideal of citizenship and attacked the positions assumed by the Spanish crown that, since the sixteenth century had promulgated special laws for the native groups:

Des exemples récents nous apprennent combien il est dangereux de laisser les Indiens former un *status in statu*, de perpétuer leur isolement, la barbarie de leurs mœurs, leur misère, et par là les motifs de leur haine contre les autres castes. Ces mêmes Indiens, stupides, indolents, et qui se laissent fustiger patiemment à la porte de l'église, se montent Tuzés, actifs, impétueux et cruels, diaque fois qu'ils agissent en masse dans une émeute populaire. [ ... After giving the example of the *Tupac Amaru rebellion*, he ends stating that] Il est du plus grand intérêt, même pour les repos des familles européennes établies depuis des siècles sur le continent du Nouveau Monde, de s'occuper des Indiens, et de les arracher à leur état actuel de barbarie, d'abjection et de misère. (Humboldt 1811, II, 478-479,451).

His liberal proposal was widely adopted in Mexico. It was made present in the idea of citizenship that intended to universalize the category "Mexican" for all distinct populations of the new country. It was also present in the recurring assertion that education would improve the lives of the Indians and that the lack of it would hold the Indians in destitution and poverty, in a "perpetual minority" and under the dominion of the Church. The idea that the conditions in which the Indians were found was circumstantial and not congenital had become a prolific speech.

Considering his sources, Humboldt once again approached what Clavijero had proposed 30 years before. He rechecked the reliability of the old chronicles, separating the wheat from the chaff. In his opinion, the European scholars had been grossly mistaken when they discarded the ancient reports as if they were all the same. Some of them were enlightened and had more critical discernment towards their object, thought the Prussian. In other words, Humboldt assessed the chronicles as sources of information more or less reliable, rejecting the Salvationist or patriotic purpose with which they were written. He also came to appreciate them for what they actually never were consistent reports in search of the scientific truth. Thus, it was possible to hierarchize them, emphasizing the most reliable.

As we affirmed earlier, Humboldt hadn't written a history book, but a guide for understanding New Spain in the early nineteenth century. For this purpose he

made use of religious and secular archives, information obtained with renowned new-Hispanic creoles and reassessed previously obtained data. Since his contributions to Mexican history are quite specific he retold what he thought could explain the reality he wanted to show. That is, he used the historical narrative only to corroborate his socio-economic and political analyses. Writings previously despised by Robertson, Raynal and others, such as Clavijero, Torquemada and the indirect reference to other authors, as Antonio de Solís, Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Bartolomé de Las Casas were present in this causal historical conception, in which the past is the cause of a measurable consequence in the present.

When Humboldt merged parts of the European Enlightenment with the critiques by Clavijero, he created a new secular and scientific form of writing the Mexican History. This conception of history, linear, progressive and universal, was still filled with the old Eurocentric provincialism of the chronic, preaching that the successes and the misfortunes of the European history would repeat themselves across the globe, by immutable laws that governed the entire cosmos. This neo-humanist conception permitted to see "developed" or "delayed" peoples in the same scale of civilization that would involve the existence of refinement, technology, religion, culture. That is, an ideal state of material, social and cultural evolution to which all mankind tended to.

## Conclusion

Humboldt had transformed the theoretical scientific frameworks of the New World. If in the chronicle tradition all men had a common religious origin (The Creation), the Prussian scholar sought for this same source in Science. If in the chronicle tradition, Men headed to Salvation, to Humboldt they marched towards Civilization. Jumping from the Creation to scientific theories of the origin of the people in world, from Salvation to Civilization, Humboldt brought a new discourse to New Spain, based on two major modified paradigms, desacralizing the origin and the end of human history.

It was Humboldt himself who, in America, rejected the paradigm of classicism for the Aztec past, proposing new analogies. Much of the new analogies placed by the Prussian approached the ancient Amerindian societies to the Asian systems of government. In a humanist and secular effort, these comparisons were carried out to prove that humanity is one and only and that it is interconnected. The Indians may have descended the steps in the ladder of civilization, with all the great misfortunes in their history, but in his own words:

comment juger, d'après ces restes misérables d'un peuple puissant, et du degré de culture auquel il

s'étoit élevé depuis le douzième jusqu'au seizième siècle, et du développement intellectuel dont il est susceptible? Si de la patrie française ou allemande il ne restait un jour que les pauvres agriculteurs, l'iroit-on dans leurs traits qu'ils appartiennent à de peuples qui ont produit les Descartes, les Clairaut, les Kepler et les Leibnitz? (Humboldt, 1811, II, 401-402).

To historical reason Humboldt reserved his secular explanations. Whereas Providence played a role in the chronicle writings, historical reason does the same for Humboldt, yet sustaining the same Universalist effort in both cases. Humboldt may have situated the process of desacralization of the historical discourse into an earthly ground, placing History under causal determinations susceptible to being elucidated by the observation of natural and historical reality. But in Mexican lands, the critical fortune of his texts was more devious.

These paradigm shifts were not crystallized in such a rectilinear and progressive manner. During the struggle for independence and even in the following years, many of the old chronicle presuppositions survived and were blended with the secular and scientific model, or with disregard to it. Although since 1820s the Mexican liberal thought had been disinterested in the chronicle tradition, it was revived by some more conservative intellectuals and politicians. David Brading demonstrated why during nation-building the creole historiography was quite unpopular. For the British scholar, the creole imaginary, based on compound kingdoms, estate society, corporate social structures, the hierarchical interdependence of Church and State, and a special legislation for the indigenous people, caused repulsion in the intellectuals of independent Mexico.

There, the constitution of a national history owed much to Humboldt, but at the same time, was distinct from him. In Mexico, it had several facets Enlightenment and Romanticism, progressive and conservative, secular and Catholic, modern and traditional - dichotomies from which resulted the formation of the nationalist scientific history in the late nineteenth century. But that is another story.

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