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Quest for knowledge in a world of politics: Humboldtian Science Diplomacy and its pursuits

ABSTRACT

Alexander von Humboldt not only managed to navigate his scientific exploration voyages through different political contexts, also Humboldtian Science as such clearly contains political facets. In the regions he visited, his eyes were not merely set on a description of the natural world; his interests always included the socio-political conditions under which its inhabitants lived. What the cosmopolitan explorer envisioned was much more than an enterprise confined to advancing the borders of knowledge; his project also had social connotations in the broadest sense. Combining different areas of knowledge allowed him to obtain new insights, and with this acumen, he aimed to influence the course of societal development. In this sense, Humboldtian Science pursued an aim that can be seen as political: creating and using knowledge for human progress and pointing to social injustice, abuses, and corruption.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Alexander von Humboldt gelang es nicht nur, seine wissenschaftlichen Erkundungsreisen durch unterschiedliche politische Rahmenbedingungen zu steuern, auch die Humboldt'sche Wissenschaft als solche weist deutlich politische Facetten auf. In den Regionen, die er besuchte, ging es ihm nicht nur um die Beschreibung der Natur, sondern sein Interesse galt stets auch den gesellschaftspolitischen Bedingungen, unter denen die Bewohner lebten. Was sich der kosmopolitische Entdecker vorstellte, war weit mehr als ein Unternehmen mit dem Ziel,

die Grenzen des Wissens zu erweitern; sein Projekt hatte auch soziale Konnotationen im weitesten Sinne. Durch die Kombination unterschiedlicher Wissensgebiete gelangte er zu neuen Erkenntnissen, mit denen er Einfluss auf die gesellschaftliche Entwicklung nehmen wollte. In diesem Sinne verfolgte die Humboldt'sche Wissenschaft ein Ziel, das als politisch angesehen werden kann: Wissen für den menschlichen Fortschritt zu schaffen und zu nutzen, und hierbei auf soziale Ungerechtigkeit, Missstände und Korruption hinzuweisen.

RESUMEN

Alexander von Humboldt no solo logró conducir sus viajes de exploración científica a través de diferentes contextos políticos, sino que también su ciencia humboldtiana como tal contiene claramente facetas políticas. En las regiones que visitó, su mirada no se limitó simplemente a la descripción del mundo natural; sus intereses siempre incluyeron las condiciones sociopolíticas en las que vivían sus habitantes. Lo que el explorador cosmopolita imaginó fue mucho más que una empresa limitada a ampliar las fronteras del conocimiento: su proyecto también tenía connotaciones sociales en el sentido más amplio. Combinando distintos áreas de conocimiento le permitió obtener un mayor nivel de comprensión y con esta perspicacia pretendió influir en el curso del desarrollo social. En este sentido, la ciencia humboldtiana persiguió un objetivo que puede considerarse político: crear y utilizar el conocimiento para el progreso humano y señalar la injusticia social, los abusos y la corrupción.



Alexander von Humboldt undertook his ambitious scientific exploration voyage in Spanish America within a challenging political moment in history, marked by strong rivalries in the quest for land and strategic influence. And, in consequence, strong rivalries for knowledge to achieve these goals. Even in his position as an independent explorer and naturalist, not being at the service of a political power and not tied to instructions provided by any institution, Humboldt still couldn't develop his work independently from the political context in which he lived. Given the attention that the knowledge generated by him attracted, he repeatedly found himself entangled in the geopolitical, strategic, or diplomatic interests of different nations.

However, precisely the close and long-lasting ties that Humboldt has maintained throughout his life with the world of politics have led to a large array of criticism. In this sense, even contradictory interpretations have flourished: while the creole elite in Spanish America depicted him as an ideological leader of the independence movement in Spanish America, in the United States, Humboldtian Science was also taken to promote the westward expansion of the nation. While some saw in him an agent for the Spanish Crown, others criticized him for facilitating geographic and statistical information to Thomas Jefferson's cabinet. Whereas abolitionists praised his profound criticism of slavery, defenders of slavery also cited him in support of their cause, albeit by manipulating and deliberately omitting those parts of his texts that did not serve their objectives. Still today, while some see in him a revolutionary, fighting fiercely for his enlightened ideals, for liberty and freedom, for others, he is yet another colonial explorer, or at least an opportunist looking out for arrangements with the political authorities that served his cause.¹ Humboldt's skillful navigation between the sciences and politics has attracted much attention, however, it has also led to numerous erroneous assumptions. It therefore requires a closer look at how he managed to pursue his scientific agenda among those different strategic pursuits, what kinds of concessions he had to make to maintain the largest level of independence possible, and, most importantly, to what extent *Humboldtian Science* itself pursued goals that contain political connotations².

Diplomatic skills required

Undoubtedly, Humboldt's American expedition was exceptional concerning his independence in establishing his itinerary, deciding the length of his stay, defining his own goals, and deciding on the personal and institutional contacts to establish.³ Nonetheless, given the complex political context, reaching agreements with representatives of power, in different situations and for various purposes, was a lifelong issue for Humboldt. Navigating his broader scientific project through opposing worldviews while maintaining his close connection to the structures of power was indeed a challenging task – one that he needed to master to avoid the failures other explorers had experienced. This applies not only to his arrangements with the Spanish crown and its representatives in the New World (Puig-Samper/Rebok, 2007), but also to other moments in his life, when Humboldt and his work would be tied to a range of different political

1 An excellent analysis of a broad array of interpretations of Humboldt, from different historical and political settings, can be found in Rupke, 2005.

2 A solid, well-argued and nuanced interpretation of the concept of *Humboldtian Science* offers Daum, 2024.

3 For a broader approach, please see the recently published biography on Humboldt (Daum 2024) and the analysis of Humboldts travels offered by Lubrich, 2022.

interests in connection with the United States, Russia, Britain, France as well as his native Prussia (Rebok, 2025 in press).

The question in general is not where his sympathies lay regarding the political panorama of his times; they seemed to coincide with the ideals of the French Republic (Daum, 2025), though without its bloody outcome, as well as with the values of the young republic in North America, except for the abominable system of slavery, which still survived in Jefferson's concept of *Empire of Liberty* (Cogliano, 2014). Working in a colonial context was certainly not Humboldt's preference, given his strong rejection of the system of imperial subjugation. But such were the conditions under which most scientific exploration voyages were carried out in his world, in the frame of the imperial pursuits by (still mostly) European powers. And these were the conditions under which, in the year 1799, he was provided with the opportunity to initiate the ambitious scientific exploration voyage for which he had been longing for years. Rather than a question of which system he preferred as an ideal setting for his scientific undertaking, the question was how best to materialize the possibilities within his reach. Once he had become aware of the exciting opportunity offered by the Spanish Empire to finally undertake an exploration voyage outside of Europe, he quickly outlined a strategy to make that happen.

Humboldt had learned early in his career that one had to act with diplomacy, caution, and acumen to obtain the moral approval, protection, and support of the political powers he came across with in his life. One of the keys to his success was his ability to recognize and circumvent the political minefields that had been the downfall of some of his fellow explorers. The unfortunate fate of Alessandro Malaspina – an Italian officer leading an exploration voyage in the service of the Spanish Crown (1789–1795), just a few years before Humboldt initiated his endeavor and to whom he felt connected in various ways – had shown him the risk of falling into disgrace (Kendrick, 2014). After completing his mission and returning to Spain, due to political intrigues at the Court, Malaspina fell into disgrace and was imprisoned in a fort in La Coruña, precisely the moment when Humboldt departed from the same place on his transatlantic mission. Also, other unlucky destinies served as examples of how he did not wish to end his project. Among them were, for instance, Lord Bristol, Frederick August Hervey, a wealthy and eccentric Anglican prelate and traveler who had invited the young Prussian in the spring of 1798 to accompany him on his voyage to Egypt, but was arrested before that by the French authorities under the charge of espionage. Later, in the New World, Humboldt came across the legacy of the Italian historian and ethnographer Lorenzo Boturini Benaducci, who had remained for years in New Spain without official permission from the Court and, in consequence, was held in prison and then expelled to Madrid. Their fates illustrated to Humboldt the dangers that could come along with his profession, and made him rather cautious and far-sighted. The fact that he pointed to his economic independence on multiple occasions during his American voyage indicates his explicit concern not to be associated with larger political interests by any political power.⁴ Not travelling in anyone's service was a way for him to avoid being thus beholden.

It also seems that during his American expedition, Humboldt had reasons to reflect on his arrangements with the Spanish government. In several cases, he reacted vehemently to the thought that anyone might perceive him as bounden to the Spanish crown. "My independence is each day more precious to me," he wrote to Karl Willdenow in 1801, "and for precisely this reason I have never accepted the slightest support from any government." What he sought to claim with this expression, which might be misleading, given the strong support for his project

4 Humboldt to Karl Ludwig Willdenow, February 21, 1801, in: Moheit, 1993, p. 227.

that he received from the Spanish Empire and the support he would in future times accept from the Prussian monarchy, was his independence from any political or institutional interests. Even decades later, Humboldt still worried about being drawn too much into politics and repeatedly affirmed the contribution to the progress of knowledge as his primary goal: his first ambition was that of a *homme de lettres*, he wrote in 1827 to his close friend François Arago in Paris, and he did not have any aspirations to get involved in politics.⁵

Nevertheless, Humboldt was well aware that through his relationships with monarchs, emperors, tsars, presidents, and other political leaders, to some extent, he would still find himself involved in their respective pursuits. Here again, the question was not which type of collaboration he preferred, but how he was to deal with reality. Although he defined being a *homme de lettres* as his *ambition*, instead of an involvement in politics, it was simply impossible for him to be apolitical. Being who he was and doing what he did in those places and at these specific moments in history, he had become too famous, influential, and powerful to stay entirely disconnected from strategic pursuits. Moreover, the success of his scientific enterprise depended on his reaching a compromise with the political world. If Humboldt's envisioned exploration voyage had been carried out in the service of a particular political power, such as Baudin's voyage to the Pacific or Napoleon's campaign in Syria and Egypt, in the frame of the French government, as he envisioned in 1798, he would not have had to worry about obtaining any official authorization. Yet his tasks and the scope of his work would have been clearly defined. However, when he decided to undertake his expedition on an independent stand, not even in the service of the Prussian monarchy, he had to take care of those "administrative" matters himself. Part of his strategy was to mention his economic independence on some occasions, while in other moments he explicitly pointed to his connection to the political power. In presenting himself at the Spanish Court, he astutely referred both to his former service for the Prussian state and his invitation to participate in the French exploration voyage, while affirming that his project was covered by his private means.⁶ While his former service in Prussia provided him with credentials regarding his professional background, being invited to a scientific government voyage – which originally was to be directed by one of France's most prestigious explorers, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, who had personally advocated for Humboldt's invitation – attested to his scholarly repute even before the beginning of the exploration voyage. In other words, the famous Prussian adeptly moved between his independence from and his ties to the political realm.

Political aspirations of Humboldtian Science

Humboldt not only developed a notable adeptness at navigating his projects through different political contexts, but also *Humboldtian Science* in and of itself entailed goals that, in a larger sense, can be considered political. As recent scholarship has shown, Humboldt was aware of the political implications of the knowledge he was able to offer (Welge, 2019; Strobl, 2018). Any type of information that he provided in his works regarding economy, geography, and agriculture, as well as trade, cultural and social diversity, racial inequality, and military defenses, could certainly also be used in a political context. Geographical descriptions have always been useful for strategic purposes, and while his maps and texts attracted scholars for their scien-

5 Humboldt to François Arago, August 20, 1827, in: Humboldt, 1908, p. 31.

6 Spanish translations of the French original document are reproduced in: Puig-Samper and Rebok, *Sentir y Medir*, p. 204.

tific value, they were likewise an important source of information for the representatives of the political power. It is thus not surprising that the broad range of knowledge that Humboldt produced was indeed considered in different political settings and in different countries as *actionable intelligence*.

The fact that Humboldt referred to both his regional treatises of New Spain and Cuba as *Political Essay*, rather than scientific or statistical works shows that he was fully cognizant of his virtue (Humboldt, 2011; Humboldt, 2019). He openly discussed topics of a political matter, not only in his grand American oeuvre but also in scattered articles that appeared over the years in different journals (Fiedler/Leitner, 2000; Lubrich/Nehrlich, 2019). Among them were articles that treated the territorial loss of Mexico and its impact; decisions taken by the Mexican government regarding possible trade routes; and his reflections on the situation of Central America and Guatemala and the future of Europe and America.⁷ It is thus not surprising that Humboldt was consulted on both sides of the Atlantic about any topic related to American affairs, in particular when attention turned to Spanish America at the outbreak of the independence movement. Given the circumstance that he had undertaken his expedition on the eve of the beginning of the social and political upraises, his expertise in this matter was much solicited. His first-hand insights and in-depth observation of the situation in very different parts of the New World were of much value, and, based on this broad expertise, special attention was given to his reflections concerning the future of the Spanish colonies. With this critical view of the colonial system, it was of interest to see how Humboldt described the pre-revolutionary situation, how he reacted to the first signs he saw of the coming situation, and what solutions he saw for the future. In 1811, for instance, Jefferson sought Humboldt's opinion, posing the question to his former guest, what kind of government he thought those emerging nations would establish. "How much liberty can they bear without intoxication?" Jefferson asked. "Are their chiefs sufficiently enlightened to form a well-guarded government, and their people to watch their chiefs? Have they minded enough to place their domesticated Indians on a footing with the whites?" All of these questions, Jefferson added to his query, Humboldt could better answer than anyone else.⁸ Also, a letter written by his brother Wilhelm in 1817, which happened to be intercepted by the French secret police, referred to the explorer's expertise as a political consultant. As an adviser to the Austrian diplomat Klemens von Metternich, Wilhelm served in building the German Confederation in 1815 and was himself well-schooled in power politics and diplomacy. However, concerning the American nations, he wrote, nobody in Europe would be as familiar with those countries as his brother Alexander.⁹ There was even a rumor about the existence of a so-called "Memoir about the Spanish Colonies in South America," allegedly written by the younger Humboldt in 1818 for the Holy Alliance conference at Aix-la-Chapelle, a meeting of the four allied powers, Great Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia, to decide the question of the withdrawal of the army of occupation from France. Though it has been proven that this document never existed, the attribution nonetheless illustrates that Humboldt was seen to be able to draft such a document (Schwarz/Biermann, 2001). Part of this interest was certainly rooted in his brother being very close to Metternich on professional terms, so anything affiliated with the name Humboldt became politicized. In any case, conscious of the delicacy of some of these questions and requests addressed to him and the potential political implications they could have, he does not always respond publicly to them.

7 See the collection of Humboldts political texts published in: Lubrich, 2010.

8 Thomas Jefferson to Humboldt, April 14, 1811, in: Schwarz, 2004, pp. 119–21.

9 Wilhelm von Humboldt to Alexander von Humboldt, October 23, 1817, in: Daudet, 1912, p. 336.

Although Humboldt criticized the social and political system in colonial societies in many ways, though he pointed to a vast range of issues requiring immediate solution, it is important to be aware that he never called for an armed revolution in any way. Humboldt was not a revolutionary in the political sense; he rather believed in the possibility and the necessity of obtaining social progress through reform (Daum, 2025). The terror of the French Revolution, as well as the cruelties committed during the Haitian Revolution and other slave riots certainly contributed to his repeatedly warning of violent reactions in America. He knew that achieving independence would not provide the solution to the social problems he observed. Inciting people to combat, in his eyes, would not lead to the construction of a stable society. Moreover, he did not have optimistic expectations of such a social upheaval that just expelled the Spaniards and put the Creole elite in their place. For him, the problem was not only the Spanish colonial administration, but also the pernicious attitude and behavior of the wealthy *criollos*. Humboldt was well aware that several aspects of the deplorable situation in the New World were rather the result of the interests of the big landowners than the consequence of the pursuits of the Crown. Among them was certainly the institution of slavery (Foner, 1984). He was therefore not convinced that the situation of the marginalized part of the society, that is, the indigenous population, enslaved people, or poor day laborers, would be in a better situation if the country were to be governed by the Creole elites. In his opinion, overthrowing the Spanish ruling class and substituting them with a powerful Creole society would rather cause “an unimaginable confusion of ideas, such as feelings and incomprehensible opinions, a general revolutionary tendency”. Once the Spaniards had left, he predicted, their discord would lead to fighting with each other (Ette, 2018, p. 280).

Humboldt did not believe that the Spanish possessions would find themselves in a more favorable economic situation if, in the long term, they achieved their independence from the financial interests of the metropolis. This can be derived from his detailed economic analyses, his trade statistics and his comments regarding the population. Though Humboldt repeatedly claimed to be more inclined towards amendments than revolutions, it was his criticisms of different aspects of the social reality in Spanish America that were used to lend ideological support to the independence movements. Given the close link in nineteenth-century Spanish America between the constitution of a nation and the creation of political and scientific myths, Humboldt appeared to be the ideal candidate for an epic figure of American independence. Not being Spanish but Prussian and thus politically neutral in this matter was certainly helpful in this regard. Thus, without his consent, Humboldt became a form of intellectual leader for the new nations, as an identifying figure for those who pursued political independence from Spain (Zeuske, 2001). In particular, a close connection between the Prussian explorer and the famous Venezuelan independence fighter Simón Bolívar, colloquially known as *The Liberator of Spanish America*, was created by falsely depicting Humboldt as the person from whom Bolívar received his political inspiration. This myth seems to be particularly attractive and has persisted until today, despite thorough refutations by experts (Zeuske, 2011). Not surprisingly, the instrumentalization of Humboldt’s critical comments for the strategic purposes of the new nations in America had its impact on the way Humboldt would be received in political circles in Spain along the 19th century and still today (Rebok, 2009).

Social concerns of Humboldtian Science

What the cosmopolitan explorer envisioned was much more than the advancement of the natural sciences. If we read his diaries or his personal correspondence, where he could express his concerns more freely, we see that foremost in his mind was not only describing America's impressive nature but also addressing the living conditions of the people and how they could be improved was at the center of his interest. More than an enterprise confined to scholarly purposes, intrigued with the generation and description of data concerning the natural world, his American Expedition can therefore also be seen as a societal project in the grandest sense. His intellectual project was to serve progress and human benefits through the perpetuation of scientific knowledge. In his works, he took much space to discuss the social realities he encountered, viewing them as consequences of specific political or economic structures. Ever mindful that promoting science for the benefit of society has also a political side to it.

Over his life, Humboldt explored different means to work towards social change, on a large and global as well as a small and local level. This sensibility for the human aspects and the different cultures he encountered in the New World is an important factor in his body of work that is still much appreciated in Ibero-America today (Rebok, 2019). It is in this context that we should understand his interest in the societal development in the Americas. Humboldt's strong social concern certainly also had its roots in his privileged upbringing and his education based on the values of the Enlightenment Sciences. Having been raised in an aristocratic family, he learned not only about the benefits of his circumstances, but also how to take on social responsibility. From an early age, he showed an acute sensitivity to different forms of injustice, and he made a personal effort to improve the situation whenever he was in a position to do so. Already at the beginning of his career, while working as a mining inspector in Franconia, his reports on the mines included sociopolitical components, along with recommendations oriented toward societal improvement.¹⁰ In his pursuits, Humboldt's assessment was not limited to mere observation: having learned about the substandard conditions of the children of the mining workers, for instance, he created at his own expense a school to provide them with a suitable education.¹¹ His early work *Über die unterirdischen Gasarten* (1799), in which he analyzed subterranean gas and the means to reduce its negative impact, reveals the same motivation. As his brother Wilhelm revealed in his prologue to that work, Alexander's motivation was to improve the health of the mine workers and his wish to awaken a sensibility for this "hard-working and respectable human class." Pointing to the problems he became aware of – and offering outlines for potential improvements – this is what he did also years later, during his travels through Spanish America, where he encountered the deplorable impact of colonial administration on society. He described the circumstances along with an analysis of their causes and their potential future developments, while at the same time developing proposals for reforms. At an even later stage in his life, conscious of his influence as a public intellectual, he used his fame to openly express diverse social concerns (Stroble, 2018). He did so, for instance, in the context of delicate political debates, when he vehemently opposed the expansion of slavery into the American West or when he took sides in the 1856 United States presidential election campaign, by publicly supporting candidate Fremont. He also advocated for the emancipation of the Jews in Prussia and protested openly when, in 1842, the edict of 1812 was partially removed, as

10 See Humboldt's report, *Bericht über den Zustand des Bergbaus und Hütten-Wesens in den Fürstentümern Bayreuth und Ansbach* (1792), published in 1959.

11 Alexander von Humboldt, "Die freie Bergschule zu Steben," March 13, 1794, in: Bruhns, 1, pp. 292–298.

an important step towards the legal equality of the Jews (Brann, 1954, pp. 44–46; Rupke, 2005, pp. 163–169; Kohut, 1871).

His voice tended to be heard; it was often incorporated into public discussions and occasionally made a direct political impact, as in the instance of a Prussian law on slavery that was passed at his instigation in March 1857. That law stated that the moment an enslaved person stepped into Prussian territory, the master's ownership ceased, and that the slave was free. Given the relatively small number of enslaved persons travelling in Prussia, the law rather demonstrates Humboldt's determination to oppose slavery wherever he had the opportunity to do so. In a way, it was the consequent evolution of early reflections on slavery that can be found in his travel diaries, written out of despair from witnessing slavery in the New World. "Shouldn't one have thought that the matter of the slaves should be dealt with in Congress? Why not pass a law forbidding anyone dealing with negroes to step on French soil, in order to stop this thriving business? Why not invoke the authority of the Pope for Catholic countries!"¹² He was not in the position to end slavery in the United States, nor in colonial America, but he had a certain influence in Prussia, which he used for this cause. Also in this regard, pointing to injustice, cases of abuses, and corruption – all these social concerns were at the same time also political.

In other words, though Humboldt has repeatedly been accused of being at the service of different nations, he explicitly had no desire whatsoever to produce knowledge for the sake of the political interests of any country. This is an important point that needs to be addressed: Humboldt did not have any aspirations to support one particular power, but to contribute to social and scientific progress in its broadest sense. In some nations, he saw more potential in this regard, in others, more need to improve the conditions. The fact that he dedicated some of his works to the political authorities he had to deal with – *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* to Carlos IV, *Asie Centrale* to Nicholas I, and *Cosmos* to Friedrich Wilhelm IV – should not be misunderstood as identification with any of those representatives at the political power and their concerns. Rather, these tributes need to be understood as a strategy for Humboldt: whenever politics was needed to further the sciences – for the creation of scientific institutions, the funding of exploration voyages, or the approval of government support for large-scale international research projects, Humboldt made ready use of his diplomatic skills and connections. This made him indeed a successful advocate of science diplomacy, not acting in the service of a specific nation but in the service of the progress of knowledge.

Early advocate of science diplomacy

Due to his excellent connections to both the scholarly and political worlds, Humboldt was in a position to bring things to pass: he connected people, ideas, and funds in order to initiate projects; he was able to establish contact between authors and publishers and thus promote publications and translations of books he considered to be important. His arguments were heard by politicians, diplomats, and policymakers, which facilitated the creation of academic institutions or the promotion of large scientific undertakings such as exploration voyages. Also, in this regard, his upbringing in the Prussian aristocratic circles was very helpful, since it had provided him with an early introduction into life at the Court. Being in some kind of service to the state was an aspiration for many young men, and both his father and older brother Wilhelm von Humboldt held such positions. It is thus not surprising that young Alexander initially fol-

12 Travel diaries cited in: Ette, 2018, p. 287.

lowed suit, first by being employed by the Prussian mining administration and in later years in a situation as “unofficial envoy” for the Prussian Court. His close relationships with the highest scholarly and political circles, particularly in Washington, London, and Paris, made him an excellent “diplomatic representative” for the monarchy.

Over the decades, Humboldt would receive various tasks, some in the context of the more imminent interests of the Court, some concerning its broader political or strategic goals. He tended to comply diligently with all of them, with an eye on connecting them to his own scholarly pursuits.¹³ In October 1807 for instance, when a commission was formed to reorganize the Academy of Sciences in Berlin after the Napoleonic Wars and the French invasion of Prussia, Humboldt was asked to act as the president of this society and to draft his suggestions for a “practical and social use of science” (Harnack, 1900, vol. 2, pp. 334–340). This was surely an agreeable duty for Humboldt, since it gave him an early chance to develop his interests as “a patron of science”. The following month, he left on an official mission to accompany Prince Wilhelm, the king’s younger brother, on a trip to Paris to negotiate a reduction in the “war compensation” that Napoleon had imposed after the Prussian-French war. Humboldt’s task was ostensibly to prepare the mission, and based on his excellent reputation and close ties to France, it was hoped that this could facilitate a more favorable outcome of those negotiations (Schwarz, 2016). He seemed to be content with his involvement in the political missions of the Prussian Court, since these official missions clearly also suited his own purposes: being well-known within the highest political circles in Europe further augmented his influence and prestige. His service to the crown would give him the chance to extend his networks through additional connections, which in turn were often advantageous for his scholarly projects, particularly in the frame of his close connections to France (Päßler, 2009; Péaud, 2015). This nearness to various Prussian monarchs over several decades made it for instance also possible for him to obtain resources from King Friedrich Wilhelm IV in 1846 to finance the studies of the Swiss naturalist and geologist Louis Agassiz in the United States, or to award the highest official Prussian honors to both Agassiz and his fellow explorer John C. Frémont.¹⁴

This is where he was at his best – as a catalyst for developments and in a position that connected the concerns of science with the pursuits of politics, in a position that we would today define as *science diplomacy* (Rebok, 2023; A European framework for science diplomacy, 2025). Given the critical comments from different perspectives that Humboldt’s close connection to the political power has led to, it might be helpful to look at his position through these lenses. The concept of *science diplomacy* might be helpful in order to better understand his strategy: Humboldt knew that he needed to go beyond discussions within scholarly circles, if he sought to turn his science into applicable knowledge and connect with the needs of society. For this purpose, he had to reach out to the political power and further scientific and technological progress through a skillful connection of both worlds. And vice versa, he needed to be willing to advance diplomatic objectives through the universal world of science. Humboldt was aware of the benefit of being at the intersection of both fields to create synergies between various interests. In fact, over the years he found multiple ways to bridge different worlds through the sciences and to address the needs and challenges of his times by strengthening the ties between the sciences and the politics: he served as a science adviser for foreign policy objectives

13 More detailed information is offered in the chapter on Humboldt’s ties to the Prussian Court in: Rebok, 2025.

14 See correspondence regarding Agassiz and Fremont in: Leitner, 2013, pp. 54–55.

to the Prussian crown and actively established contact with the diplomatic world to facilitate international scientific cooperation, including large-scale science projects.

From an overall standpoint, Humboldt was successful with his mission. Analyzing his broad correspondence, it becomes obvious that individuals were willing to provide him with all kinds of information, including information that could be considered confidential. Moreover, information seemed to gain value when it was passed through Humboldt: it was considered more reliable when associated with him, favors were carried out more quickly and more thoroughly when his name was connected to them. People were likely to respond expediently and were willing to take action at his request. Institutions and even nations were eager to be connected to his ambitious project for the modernization of the sciences. Moreover, it seemed to be a privilege to be a part of his global and powerful empire of knowledge, which over the years, with his prestige still growing, would become even more influential.

In short, Humboldt had much to offer: his international and highly influential networks, a growing body of both restricted historical and latest state-of-the-art knowledge, and his cosmopolitan and very likable personality. It was in his deep conviction about what he considered his mission in life that he turned his assets – his private funds, his excellent education, and his influential connections – into a public good for the advancement of science. And with his entrepreneurial spirit, his extraordinary communication skills, and his diplomatic prowess, he developed a resource for the public good, an ability to look beyond a present situation and to recognize potential future developments. The combination of these attributes, together with his keen perception of connections – their causes as well as their consequences – formed the basis of his own work at the intersection of the sciences and politics.

Quest for knowledge in a world of politics

Humboldt has not only received criticism for his proximity to political circles, but also the use of the knowledge generated by him for different purposes has raised concerns. At this point, however, we need to remain realistic: how could he have undertaken his scientific venture in the frame of any political power without reaching certain agreements? Would he ever have been offered the generous conditions by the Spanish Empire in 1799, which were key to the development of *Humboldtian Science*, if the Crown had not had an interest in what he, in turn, had to offer? Along similar lines, also in the United States, the initial interest in Humboldt was based on the geographic, statistical, and cartographic nature of his work and its potential value for their strategy to expand the nation. And later it was his expertise in the field of mineralogy that built the foundation for the invitation he received in 1829 from the Russian tsar Nicolas I, leading to his second major expedition outside of Europe.

Humboldt should therefore not only be seen in connection with one empire. The political panorama that he encountered throughout his life were much more diverse and complex in themselves. Instead of exclusively reflecting on his ties to the Spanish Empire on both sides of the Atlantic, we need to broaden our view and look at his connection to the world of politics in multiple different ways. Certainly, the knowledge that he generated could be used in the frame of a colonial context, as Spain did, or for the economic pursuits of the Russian Empire, or likewise for the U.S. westward expansion. However, it could also be applied to those contexts where it furthered the well-being of society – Humboldt's overarching purpose. Looking at Latin America, it becomes evident that the cosmopolitan explorer pursued yet another goal, which is intrinsically political: instead of extracting knowledge in the colonies for the benefit

of the metropolis, as it was the custom in his times, he was more eager to incorporate the New World into a global network and reach a fruitful and mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and ideas.

Should he then be held accountable for the way the knowledge generated by him has been applied to pursuits that were outside his purposes? Certainly, developments such as the creation of global markets, the striving for economic investments in Spanish America, or the exploitation of mines have benefited from the knowledge made accessible by him to any reader. However, instead of looking for aspects that he can be held responsible for, it might be more effective to reflect on the consequences which our conclusions might lead to. The ties between science and politics are very delicate, without doubt, and should be subject to scrutiny. Yet these connections are relevant and can potentially be beneficial for both sides, as much in his time as in ours. As we become increasingly aware of, in the context of the challenges we are confronting today, the advances of science need to be implemented in society; they need to be brought to policymakers, diplomats, and practitioners to help them make informed decisions. Hence, the connection as such should be nurtured as a potentially mutually beneficial relationship. This was what Humboldt aspired to do; he was concerned about the progress of knowledge and how it could be used to address societal needs and improvements. He thus saw the political world as an entity that he needed to collaborate with to further both his purely scientific pursuits and his larger socio-political visions. In a way, this can be seen as a rather modern understanding of this intersection: using science to transform society and politics to pave the way for scientific development. In the end, his way of finding a balance between his pursuits and the circumstances of his time not only made his travels as an independent scholar possible but also saved him from other, less fortunate explorers' fates.

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