

The Jayne Lecture

A Young Man from “ultima Thule” Visits
Jefferson: Alexander von Humboldt in
Philadelphia and Washington¹

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AT THE AMERICAN Philosophical Society, almost to the day fifty years ago, Helmut de Terra, a historian of science at Columbia University, read a paper on “Motives and Consequences of Alexander von Humboldt’s Visit to the United States (1804).”² The year 1959 was the one hundredth anniversary of Humboldt’s death. In the preceding two years, de Terra had been publishing, in the *Proceedings*, various papers dealing with Humboldt’s relationship to the United States, including Humboldt’s correspondence with Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin.³ Also in 1959, the Geographical Society of Berlin issued a festschrift that included a thorough piece by the chief archivist of the Cartographic Records Division of the National Archives, Herman Friis, on Humboldt’s visit.⁴

More recently, Humboldt’s correspondence and other Humboldt texts on the topic of the United States were edited in the original languages with detailed introductions and notes by Ingo Schwarz for the Alexander von Humboldt Research Center at the Berlin-Brandenburg

¹Read 14 November 2009. An earlier version of this lecture was given, in German, at the annual public meeting of the Orden Pour le mérite für Wissenschaften und Künste in Berlin on 8 June 2009. Of the present membership of the American Philosophical Society, fourteen are also members of the Orden Pour le mérite.

I am indebted to Sean McIntyre for a translation of the Berlin talk and for some research assistance. The present text is a revision of the one presented in Berlin.

²De Terra 1960. The paper was given on 12 November 1959.

³See reference list. De Terra’s translations are not always reliable.

⁴Friis 1959.

Academy of Sciences.⁵ Finally, in 2006, the topic of Humboldt's visit to the United States and his influence on America was taken up by Aaron Sachs in his book *The Humboldt Current*. Given Humboldt's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all cosmic phenomena, Sachs considers him "the first ecologist."⁶

The Humboldt literature is so immense that a fresh contribution by a nonexpert is impossible. What I should like to offer in this sesquicentennial of Humboldt's death, is a reminder of his visit that makes use of letters, diaries, and other similar documents to give as vivid an insight as possible into some of the subjects that occupied Humboldt and Jefferson at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The issues are great and diverse, and range from the natural sciences to the expansion of the United States and the subject of slavery.

On the fourth of June 1804, President Jefferson hosted a dinner at the President's House,⁷ for Alexander von Humboldt, his travel companions Bonpland⁸ and Montúfar, and some of Humboldt's new acquaintances from Philadelphia, among them Charles Willson Peale (fig. 1). Peale reports in his diary that the dinner was very elegant and that no toasts were given, nor were politics a subject. Instead, the dinner guests engaged in lively discussion on topics of interest to all: natural history, improvements of daily life, and the customs of different nations.⁹

Jefferson's reputation among his contemporaries for his lifelong and far-reaching pursuit of scientific, technical, and architectural interests was not restricted to the United States. In 1804, when Humboldt endeavored to gain an invitation to Washington, he was already familiar with Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* and with Jefferson's catholic interests as "a friend of the sciences."¹⁰ Jefferson, for his part, had no reason to know of the thirty-four-year-old Prussian "baron" from Paris.

He wished for the opportunity to report about the mammoth teeth that he had found in the Andes above three thousand meters, wrote

⁵Schwarz 2004 (ed.). I am indebted to Ingo Schwarz for a number of suggestions that I received in writing and during a visit I paid him at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy.

⁶Sachs, 6. Likewise, Louis Agassiz, at the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of Humboldt's birth, had referred to Humboldt's view of the world's "mutually dependent features"; Agassiz, 28. On the "romantic" aspects of this holistic approach, see Nicolson, 183.

⁷Only later would it be called the White House.

⁸On the botanist Bonpland, see Schneppen.

⁹Miller (ed.), 693. Peale gave Americans also the first lasting impression of Humboldt through the fine portrait he painted immediately before Humboldt's departure for Bordeaux. It can now be found in the director's office at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

¹⁰Humboldt to Jefferson, 24 May 1804. In de Terra 1959, 787–88; see also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 89–90.



FIGURE 1. Charles Willson Peale, *Alexander von Humboldt*, 1804. Courtesy of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

Humboldt to the president of the United States on 24 May from Philadelphia. Jefferson, Humboldt said, had discussed the mammoth “ingeniously” in his book on Virginia.¹¹

How Humboldt knew the *Notes on Virginia* is unclear. One possible explanation is offered by the fact that, in 1790, Humboldt was a student in Hamburg, where he had access to Christoph Daniel Ebeling’s library of Americana. Ebeling was a strong supporter of American independence and trade with America and later the author of a seven-volume magisterial description and history of the United States in

¹¹ Ibid.

German.¹² A 1795 letter from Ebeling to Thomas Jefferson shows that Ebeling owned the 1787 London edition of the *Notes*.¹³

Humboldt's first letter to Jefferson contains other comments designed to evoke the president's interest: Humboldt's great admiration for Jefferson (whose writings, actions, and liberality of thought had inspired him since his most tender early years), Humboldt's admiration for the American Republic, his knowledge of South America and New Spain, his travel adventures—the experiences “of a young man” from an extremely distant northern place, “ultima Thule” in Humboldt's ironic reference to Prussia. He hoped for permission to express his respects in person and to admire at close hand the “Magistrat philosophe” who had garnered the acclaim of two continents.¹⁴

Who could resist receiving such a flattering young man? Indeed, the invitation to Washington came promptly. The American consul in Havana had already pointed out to Jefferson and Secretary of State James Madison that the traveler possessed much valuable information about the neighboring Viceroyalty of New Spain, that is, Mexico.

Humboldt had arrived in Philadelphia from Havana on 23 May. His ship, the *Concepción*, had been hit so violently by a storm that Humboldt had feared for his life and that of his travel companions, as well as for forty boxes of manuscripts and collected objects, representing “all the fruits of my labors.”

At this time, Philadelphia, with between forty and fifty thousand residents, was, after New York, the second largest city in the United States.¹⁵ Then as now, the American Philosophical Society was one of the city's most prominent institutions. Immediately upon his arrival, Humboldt was invited to its meetings. He was voted a member two weeks after his departure for France. During his six-week stay in Philadelphia and Washington, Humboldt associated above all with members of the Society.

Why did Humboldt decide to travel to Philadelphia instead of returning from Havana directly to Europe? He offered rather contradictory explanations, though different motives may, of course, have come together. In his diary, he writes, during the storm en route to Philadelphia, “I felt very much stirred up. To see myself perish on the eve of so many joys, to watch all the fruits of my labors going to pieces, to cause

¹² His collection of books and maps eventually ended up at Harvard University.

¹³ Jefferson, *Papers*, 28:424.

¹⁴ Humboldt to Jefferson, 24 May 1804. In de Terra 1959, 787–88; see also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 89–90. This was the first of eight known letters from Humboldt to Thomas Jefferson. They are complemented by six available letters from Jefferson to Humboldt. Humboldt's last letter to Jefferson is from 1825, thus shortly before Jefferson's death the following year.

¹⁵ For comparison, Washington had only about five thousand inhabitants.

the death of my two companions, to perish during a voyage to Philadelphia which seemed by no means necessary (though undertaken to save our manuscripts and collections from the perfidious Spanish policies).¹⁶

Humboldt's Latin American expedition had been authorized, though not funded, by the Spanish Crown and supported with passports.¹⁷ It is possible that he feared he would become a victim of politics if he went from Cuba first to Spain. From Philadelphia, Humboldt had the opportunity to sail directly to France. In making that choice, he could have had in mind the example of his predecessors, Lorenzo Boturini and Alessandro Malaspina, both of whom got into serious conflicts with the Spanish government on account of their Latin American expeditions.

It is also possible that Vincent Gray, the American consul in Havana, had encouraged the detour because it was clear to him that Humboldt could be a significant source of information about Mexico.

To Jefferson, Humboldt explained his detour in the following terms: “In spite of my intense desire to be back in Paris, I could not resist the moral interest to see the United States and to enjoy the comforting aspect of a people who appreciate the precious gift of freedom.”¹⁸

To James Madison, the secretary of state, he wrote even more effusively: “After having witnessed the great spectacle of the majestic Andes and the grandeur of the physical world I intend to enjoy the spectacle of a free people worthy of a great destiny.”¹⁹

Since, in 1804, the French Revolution was abandoning republicanism and making an emperor out of Napoleon, the United States must have represented to Humboldt, the republican-minded advocate of human rights, what could no longer be found in—his words—an “immoral and melancholy” Europe.²⁰ Also, 1804 was the year when Beethoven withdrew the dedication of his Third Symphony to Bonaparte.

The major exception to Humboldt's idealization of the United States was the institution of slavery. In a letter written shortly before his departure from Philadelphia to William Thornton, the architect of the Capitol, with whom he had become acquainted in Washington, Humboldt used words such as “disgrace” and “abominable” to characterize the institution.²¹

¹⁶As quoted in Schwarz 2001, 6.

¹⁷Humboldt paid for it from his own funds.

¹⁸Humboldt to Jefferson, 24 May 1804. In de Terra 1959, 787–88; see also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 89–90.

¹⁹Humboldt to Madison, 24 May 1804. In de Terra 1959, 796; see also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 91.

²⁰Humboldt's farewell letter to Jefferson, 27 June 1804. In de Terra 1959, 789; see also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 101.

²¹Humboldt to Thornton, 20 June 1804. In Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 96–97.

On the other hand, when talking to the slaveholder Jefferson, it appears that Humboldt remained silent on the subject—as though Jefferson’s general defense of human rights, freedom, and democracy were more important to him than Jefferson’s inconsistencies. Basically, Humboldt’s views were similar to those of Madame de Staël, who argued in a letter to Jefferson that, should slavery in the South be abolished, there would be at least *one* government in the world as perfect as human reason can perceive it.²²

Among the motives that brought Humboldt to Washington was certainly also the wish of the “young man from ultima Thule” to become acquainted with a head of state whose writings, ideas, and actions had inspired him, as he said, for many years. Also, in the president of the United States Humboldt could see, as it were, a scholarly “colleague.” When Humboldt, after his return to Paris, was presented at court, Napoleon’s only reaction is said to have been, “You are a botanist. My wife also does botany.”²³

On account of our own generation’s rather ahistorical view of globalization as the new thing, we tend to forget how interconnected the sciences already were at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. His trip to the United States also offered Humboldt new opportunities for scientific contacts and ideas. He got so engaged that in his farewell letters he expressed the hope to return some day: “This country that stretches to the west of the mountains presents a vast area to conquer for science!”²⁴

Geography, cartography, plants, zoology, and fossils were topics that Humboldt could discuss in the circle of the American Philosophical Society. I remind us that, for membership, Benjamin Franklin had targeted above all doctors, botanists, mathematicians, chemists, mechanics, geographers, and natural philosophers, though judges, lawyers, pastors, and businessmen could also be chosen. At the time of Humboldt’s visit, Jefferson was still president of the Society, having retained that position even after he had become president of the United States. Humboldt’s membership certificate carries Jefferson’s signature.

²²Chinard, 636.

²³Various versions of this remark exist in the literature. Napoleon did not like and actively distrusted Humboldt.

²⁴Humboldt to Thornton, 20 June 1804. In Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 96–97. See also <http://www2.ku.edu/~maxkade/humboldt/contents.htm>. A second visit did not, of course, materialize; however, in the third edition of his *Views of Nature*, Humboldt offered so vivid a sketch of the natural features of North America, that one might believe he had seen the American West himself; cf. Humboldt 1850, 31. For his description, he relied mainly on John Frémont’s account of the latter’s expeditions to the Rocky Mountains and to Oregon and Northern California.

One of the interests of the American Philosophical Society and of Jefferson at the turn of the century was, of course, if not “the measurement of the world,”²⁵ then at least a survey and exploration of the North American West.²⁶ In January of 1803, Jefferson had placed before Congress a secret request for \$2,500 to finance the expedition he then assigned to his secretary Meriwether Lewis.²⁷ In the late summer of 1803, Lewis and William Clark set out together with their Corps of Discovery to reach the Pacific by land. At the time of Humboldt’s arrival in Philadelphia, the three-year undertaking was under way and heading west on the Missouri.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition had, of course, a direct connection to one of the most seminal events in American history: Napoleon’s sale of the Louisiana Territory to the United States in 1803. As it turned out, Humboldt’s visit to the United States also had relevance for the Louisiana acquisition.

In 1800, the secret Treaty of San Ildefonso had returned ownership of Louisiana from the Spanish to the French. Jefferson viewed a French presence in North America as unwelcome for shipping on the Mississippi and for his vague but ambitious imperialist plans.²⁸ What Jefferson had hoped to obtain from Napoleon was a partial sale of Louisiana. That he could in the end acquire the entire Louisiana Territory—more than eight hundred thousand square miles—for the price of \$18 per square mile far exceeded Jefferson’s expectations. At the time of the treaty signing in Paris, at the end of April 1803, neither France nor the United States had a precise notion of the borders of Louisiana or of what was within those borders.

Jefferson’s instructions for Lewis and his expedition were very detailed, ranging from cartography to relations with Indian tribes, from geological and meteorological conditions to plant and animal life, including fossils of unknown species. In addition, the president sent Lewis to Philadelphia to procure the necessary instruments and receive

²⁵The reference is to Daniel Kehlmann’s novel about Humboldt and Gauss, *Measuring the World*.

²⁶In 1793, the Society had ventured to finance, by subscription, an expedition entrusted to the French botanist André Michaux. The principal goal was to discover the shortest and most convenient connection between the upper Mississippi and the Pacific. According to Jefferson’s instructions, Michaux was to pay particular attention to cartography and surveying, to local inhabitants and their culture, topographical features, plants, animals, minerals, and paleontology, in particular the mammoth. The expedition was not undertaken. Jefferson, *Papers*, 25:75 (editorial note).

²⁷The request was code-named “Expansion of Foreign Trade.” The reasons Jefferson gave were American expansion and the advancement of the “geographical knowledge of our own continent.” *Annals of Congress*, Senate, 7th Congress, 2nd Session, 25–26.

²⁸See DeConde; also, Herring.

instruction by members of the American Philosophical Society in the relevant scientific disciplines. Lewis's contacts in Philadelphia were essentially the same men who months later would warmly greet Humboldt. Among them were, besides the already mentioned multi-disciplinary Peale, two later presidents of the American Philosophical Society, the anatomist and physician Caspar Wistar and the mathematician Robert Patterson, as well as another physician and botanist, Benjamin Smith Barton, and John Vaughan the wine merchant, who served as the Society's treasurer and librarian.

Of these men, Peale, Wistar, and Jefferson shared a specific passion that Humboldt also seized upon and that a little later became known as "paleontology." When Jefferson came to Philadelphia in 1797 to take the oath of office as vice president of the United States, he reported to the American Philosophical Society on the giant sloth found in Virginia and correctly identified as such by Caspar Wistar in 1799. Jefferson's 1797 effort, on the other hand, was based on the erroneous conclusion that the find was a great cat some three times the size of a lion. His paper was titled "A Memoir of the Discovery of Certain Bones of a Quadruped of the Clawed Kind in the Western Parts of Virginia."²⁹ George Gaylord Simpson, in a paper read at the Society in 1942, had this to say about Jefferson's "memoir": "Like most of Jefferson's writings, this paper is a model of eloquence and a pleasure as a literary production. As scientific research it departs from inaccurate observations and proceeds by faulty methods to an erroneous conclusion."³⁰

Jefferson's main paleontological interest was the mastodon, a trunked mammal, a Proboscidea, extinct for approximately ten thousand years. We now know that, 24 to 28 million years ago, the mastodon split off from the family that would later ("just" 6–8 million years ago) lead to the African and Asian elephants and the *Mammuthus primigenius*, the woolly mammoth.³¹ The name "mammoth" was often used to describe the mastodon as well (for instance, by Jefferson, Humboldt, and Peale). The mastodon and mammoth differed in various ways, most importantly their teeth, which reflect their different feeding patterns as browsers and grazers respectively.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were fascinated by widespread mammoth and mastodon fossil discoveries, though—proving that even in the Age of Enlightenment science could be politicized—

²⁹ Jefferson 1799. Today, the fossils that Jefferson brought with him are preserved at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, where I was able to view them and mastodon fossils in December 2008.

³⁰ Simpson, 157. See Kerber, 72.

³¹ <http://biology.plosjournals.org/perlserv/?request=getdocument&doi=10.1371/journal.pbio.0050207>.

the interest of Jefferson and of the American Philosophical Society in natural history became the object of Federalist political satire. Josiah Quincy, later the president of Harvard and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, with which the Society had a strong rivalry at the time, suggested, as Linda Kerber has summarized, that an active interest in bones was at least dim-witted, and possibly evidence of mental disturbance.³²

In his *Notes on Virginia*,³³ Jefferson had speculated that the mastodon was limited to the northern parts of America and the plains. He also cited Indians who claimed that the animal still existed, was not extinct: a great comfort to the man who denied the possibility that nature would allow a breach in the chain of being.³⁴

Consequently, in his first letter to Jefferson,³⁵ Humboldt correctly guessed that his own mastodon discovery south of the equator above three thousand meters would arouse Jefferson's curiosity. Humboldt and Jefferson shared intense interests in investigation through observation, surveying nature, appraisal of mineral resources, collection of data, and classification.³⁶ A comparison of the table of contents from *Notes on Virginia* with Humboldt's *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne*³⁷ also demonstrates a shared range of interests, for which nothing was extraneous. It extended to demography, economy, society, and political dispositions. The Humboldt researcher Ingo Schwarz sees Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* as a model for Humboldt's later work on Latin America.³⁸

On 1 June Humboldt and his travel companions arrived in Washington, and the following morning he made his first formal visit to Jefferson. Humboldt spent ten full days in Washington. During these ten days, he frequently had the opportunity to converse with Jefferson—the door to the President's House was open to him.³⁹ He also had repeated

³²Kerber, 73.

³³Jefferson 1800.

³⁴Cf. Simpson, 157.

³⁵Humboldt to Jefferson, 24 May 1804. In de Terra 1959, 787–88; see also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 89–90.

³⁶Jefferson was one of the first to use the Linnaean System in America.

³⁷Humboldt 1811.

³⁸Schwarz 2001, 7.

³⁹During one of his visits, it is said that Humboldt noticed on a table an opposition newspaper full of defamatory accusations against Jefferson. In answer to Humboldt's question why the newspaper was not censored, Jefferson answered (according to Margaret Bayard Smith), “Put that paper in your pocket, Baron, and should you hear the reality of our liberty, the freedom of our press, questioned, show this paper and tell where you found it.” Smith, 397. In fact, Jefferson's position on freedom of the press was much more complicated than this anecdote suggests. He denied any federal authority over the press, but affirmed state authority.

associations with Secretary of State Madison, with Albert Gallatin, the scientifically-minded secretary of the Treasury, and the earlier-mentioned architect and physician William Thornton.⁴⁰

In other respects, Humboldt was “the toast of the town.” One of the leading figures of Washington society, Margaret Bayard Smith, saw in Humboldt a “citizen of the world,” “kind, frank, cordial in his disposition, expansive and enlightened in his views.”⁴¹ William Burwell, Jefferson’s private secretary, praised his simple, unaffected manners and noted that he was remarkably sprightly, vehement in conversation.⁴² Gallatin, who became a lifelong academic correspondent, wrote to his wife, “[H]e speaks twice as fast as anybody I know, German, French, Spanish, and English, all together. But I was really delighted, and swallowed more information of various kinds in less than two hours than I had for two years past in all I had read or heard. He does not seem much above thirty, gives you no trouble in talking yourself, for he catches with perfect precision the idea you mean to convey before you have uttered the third word of your sentence. . . .”⁴³

John Bachman recalled that in every gathering, Humboldt was the center point, “ready to answer any question that was propounded to him, and evidencing throughout a spirit of gentleness and kindness, and great amiability of character.”⁴⁴ In a letter to Caspar Wistar, Jefferson expressed his highest satisfaction over Humboldt’s immeasurable treasure of information and his (Jefferson’s) eagerness to see it all in print.

The main concern of political Washington was for what Humboldt had to report about Mexico. On 9 June—Humboldt was still in Washington—Jefferson brought it to Humboldt’s attention that Spain viewed the Sabine River as the western border of Louisiana (today it marks the border between the states of Louisiana and Texas), whereas Jefferson wanted to claim the entire area up to the Rio Bravo del Norte (Rio Grande)—an outcome that the United States achieved only by means of the Mexican-American War and the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. “Can the Baron inform me what population may be between those lines of white, red, or black people? And whether any and what mines are within them?”⁴⁵

⁴⁰Besides visiting the Capitol, Patent Office, and others among the few places of interest in Washington, Humboldt’s sightseeing also took him to Mount Vernon.

⁴¹Smith 1906, 396.

⁴²As quoted in Friis 1959, 181.

⁴³Gallatin to Hannah Gallatin, 6 June 1804. In Adams, 323.

⁴⁴Bachman, 39. These are qualities that seem to be captured by Peale’s portrait.

⁴⁵Jefferson to Humboldt, 9 June 1804. In de Terra 1959, 789; see also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 93.

In his response, Humboldt advised him that, if the Rio Grande were the western border, Spain would have surrendered an additional area two-thirds the size of France. But, Humboldt wrote, the political value of this land, considering it before the joining of Louisiana to the United States, was almost nil. "These 11,756 leagues constitute the most deserted region of an administrative unit that is very depopulated as it is. They have no more than at most 42,000 inhabitants, for the most part whites, descendants of European Spaniards who subsist on pastures and corn, which they cultivate in scattered tenant farms." Humboldt described the region as "not promising" and "virgin and uninhabited land."⁴⁶ In addition to this account, Humboldt provided Jefferson with statistical tables on Mexico that he had originally prepared for the Spanish viceroy.⁴⁷

The interests of Jefferson, Gallatin, and Madison, however, were not limited to Mexico and Humboldt's maps, which he generously allowed the Treasury secretary to copy. Their interests extended to the mass of data and insights that Humboldt had gathered and processed during his five-year expedition in Latin America.⁴⁸ Schwarz believes that, among other things, Humboldt and Jefferson discussed the possibility of a canal between the Atlantic and the Pacific.⁴⁹ Humboldt did raise the matter in a letter to the secretary of state before his departure from Philadelphia.⁵⁰ Later in life, he focused on the Isthmus of Panama as the preferred location.⁵¹

It is also likely that Jefferson received from Humboldt a deeper understanding of how fragile the Spanish Empire in America had become.⁵² Albert Gallatin wrote to his wife that Humboldt's planned book would outpace all previous publications of this kind, rendering "the geography, productions, and statistics of that country better known than those of most European countries."⁵³ After Humboldt had returned to Europe,

⁴⁶Humboldt to Jefferson, undated, after 9 June 1804. As translated from the French in Baron and Hare: <http://www2.ku.edu/~maxkade/humboldt/contents.htm>. See also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 484.

⁴⁷Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 485.

⁴⁸On the very day of his departure from America on 30 June 1804, Humboldt sent for translation and publication the first authentic, if cursory, overview of his Latin American expedition to John Vaughan, treasurer of the American Philosophical Society. In Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 497–513.

⁴⁹Schwarz 2000, 181.

⁵⁰Humboldt to Madison, 21 June 1804. In de Terra 1959, 797–98; see also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 97–98.

⁵¹Schwarz 2000, 182.

⁵²Mary Louise Pratt argues that, at the time of Humboldt's visit, Latin American societies were already taking on a life of their own and were constructing "decolonized visions of themselves in relation to Europe"; Pratt, 140.

⁵³Gallatin to Hannah Gallatin, 6 June 1804. In Adams, 323. Also quoted in Friis 1960, 26.

he remained in close contact and routinely furnished his new American scientific friends with his studies.

In his farewell letter to President Jefferson, Humboldt expressed his extremely positive basic attitude toward the United States: "I have had the good fortune to see the first Magistrate of this great republic living with the simplicity of a philosopher⁵⁴ who received me with that profound kindness that makes for a lasting friendship. My circumstances oblige me to leave but I carry with me the consoling experience of having seen the people of this continent advance with great strides towards the perfection of social conditions, whereas Europe presents an immoral and melancholy spectacle."⁵⁵

Admittedly, this perfection has been a long time coming. In 1804, as well as over the many decades that followed in which he maintained his lively interest in American politics through readings and his frequent association with Americans in Paris and Berlin, Humboldt remained an acute and unforgiving critic of slavery.⁵⁶

Already in 1804, he had expressed, to William Thornton, his wish that an end would be put to the import of slaves even before the constitutional deadline of 1808: "This abominable law that permits the importation of Negroes in South Carolina is a disgrace for a state in which I know many level-headed people to live. Conforming to the only course of action dictated by humanity, undoubtedly less cotton will be exported at first. But alas! How I detest this politics that measures and evaluates the public welfare simply according to the value of its exports. The wealth of nations is like the wealth of individuals. It is only secondary to our happiness. Before one is free, one must be just, and without justice there is no lasting prosperity."⁵⁷

A few days after Humboldt's death on 6 May 1859, the *New York Times* published the report of an American student who had been able to visit the eighty-nine-year-old in January that same year. He quoted Humboldt as saying, "I am half American."⁵⁸ That is, my aspirations and desires are all with you, but I don't like the present position of your

⁵⁴In a letter to Varnhagen von Ense dated 24 October 1834, Humboldt speaks of his own "grave simplicity." Kapp, 39.

⁵⁵Humboldt to Jefferson, 27 June 1804. In de Terra 1959, 789; see also, Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 101.

⁵⁶Cf. Foner.

⁵⁷Humboldt to Thornton, 20 June 1804. Translation by Dr. Frank Baron. <http://www2.ku.edu/~maxkade/humboldt/contents.htm>. I substituted "happiness" for Baron's second "welfare." Humboldt uses "félicité" in both instances.

⁵⁸In a letter to Prince Metternich, Humboldt characterized himself as "presque Américain." Humboldt to Metternich, 28 May 1836. Quoted in Schwarz 2004 (ed.), 196.

politics. The influence of slavery is increasing, I fear."⁵⁹ Humboldt could not have predicted Lincoln's election and the outbreak of the Civil War just two years later.

In the last years of his life, Humboldt's attitude toward the United States became more critical. In 1854, for instance, he wrote to his friend Varnhagen von Ense: "In the United States there has, it is true, arisen a great love for me, but the whole there presents to my mind the sad spectacle of liberty reduced to a mere mechanism in the element of utility, exercising little ennobling or elevating influence upon mind and soul, which, after all, should be the aim of political liberty. Hence indifference on the subject of slavery. But the United States are a Cartesian vortex, carrying everything with them, grading everything to the level of monotony."⁶⁰

Since the founding generation, important members of which Humboldt had gotten to know personally, the United States had no doubt changed. "As hardheaded and practical as they were," many of the revolutionary leaders entertained, in Gordon Wood's words, "nothing less than a utopian hope for a new moral and social order led by enlightened and virtuous men."⁶¹

By contrast, five years before Humboldt's letter to Varnhagen von Ense, in 1849, Henry Thoreau offered an assessment of his fellow citizens that was strikingly similar to Humboldt's slightly later formulation:

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform . . . are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, *cost what it may*. . . There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free trade, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both.⁶²

⁵⁹*New York Times*. The first presidential candidate of the Republican Party in 1856 was John Frémont, the geographer and "Pathfinder of the West" much admired by Humboldt; see n. 24. Humboldt saluted him also because he was an opponent of slavery. Frémont's supporters, among them many voters of German descent, were aware of and very much welcomed Humboldt's views on slavery. In a three-way election, however, Frémont placed second after James Buchanan.

⁶⁰Kapp, 305.

⁶¹Wood, 189–90.

⁶²Thoreau 2008, 6–7.

As distinguished from other German critics of the United States—the caustic Schopenhauer, for instance⁶³—Humboldt, on the whole, remained well disposed. In his final year alone, he gave a speech on American Independence Day, and then, two months before his death, at an event marking George Washington's birthday, Humboldt once again employed the phrase "I am half American."⁶⁴ More than fifty years after the "young man from ultima Thule" became acquainted with America's founding generation, he remained deeply interested in the success of the American model.

Now, more than two hundred years after Humboldt's visit to Philadelphia and Washington, the perfection of social conditions has not been achieved in America, or, for that matter, in most other countries. Justice as a precondition of lasting prosperity requires continual striving. Likewise, what Humboldt called the "precious gift of freedom" must be fought for again and again. Yet it is true, generally speaking, that what lay closest to Humboldt's political heart, freedom and justice *worldwide*, today, by and large, is more seriously pursued than Humboldt could ever have anticipated.

Humboldt's and Jefferson's world was a constantly expanding one. Both men were willing to observe, measure, classify, describe, and pass judgment. They were also willing to influence the world. While they differed significantly in their scientific accomplishments, they both got to know one another as "scholars" (*Gelehrte*) in the sense in which Kant used that term in his "[A]nswer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'"⁶⁵ Both men had dedicated themselves to the freedom—I employ Kant's German—"von ihrer Vernunft in allen Stücken öffentlichen Gebrauch zu machen":⁶⁶ to make public use of their reason in all matters.

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⁶³Schopenhauer, in 1851, wrote that, in the United States, base utilitarianism went hand in hand with ignorance, bigotry, mockery of the law, repudiation of public indebtedness, slavery, lynch law, murder, invasion of a neighboring country, and many other vices; Grisebach (ed.), 260–61.

⁶⁴As reported by Wright, 415.

⁶⁵Reiss (ed.), 54–60.

⁶⁶Kant, 55.

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