

***Einheit in der Vielheit* (unity in diversity) — On the topicality of Humboldt’s ethnographic reflections for today’s world**

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Abstract

My contribution is based on Alexander von Humboldt’s essay *Die Einheit des Menschengeschlechts* (1852). This is a wonderful example of the humanistic ethos in the mindset of the time, yet it is also an excellent illustration of a Eurocentric perspective. In a similar way ambivalent is the position taken by Alexander together with Wilhelm von Humboldt on the role of language in a community. On the one hand, they praised comparative language studies (*das vergleichende Sprachstudium*) as the ideal way of understanding not only “the other,” but also “the own” language. On the other hand, they were strong advocates of the development of a monolingual (German) nation. I wish to illustrate in my contribution that this ambivalence is a feature of not only Germany’s national self-conception until today — which is a challenge for language politics and education in a migration society.

Historical encounters and perspectives

Alexander von Humboldt was a personality who tirelessly sought to decipher the mysteries of animate and inanimate nature. His paradigm was that of traveling and collecting evidence by field observations and the collection of samples. It is not surprising that this method involved encountering a multitude of people who also posed mysteries to the observer.¹

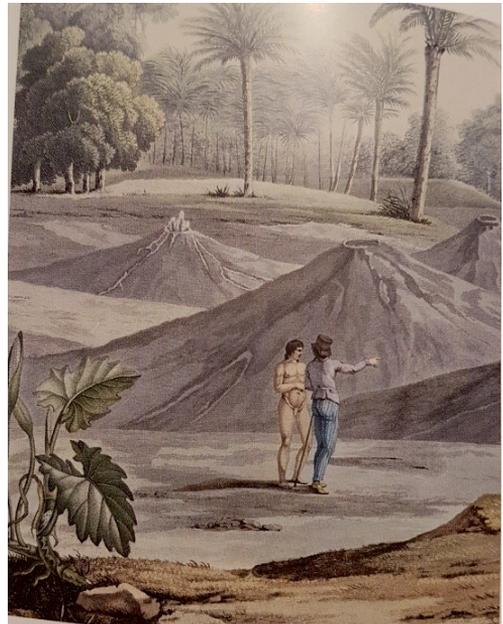


Figure 1: Humboldt in conversation with an indigenous man in Turbaco/today: Colombia (from Wulf 2015, p. 272b).

¹ The illustrations in my contribution are taken from: Andrea Wulf (2015).

The overwhelming abundance of his discoveries of nature may, however, have led to the result that his observations related to encounters with human beings have received relatively little attention—and continue to do so to this day. Another reason may be that the remarks “about the human species” (*über das Menschengeschlecht*, translation I.Go.) make up only a small part of his complete oeuvre, which, moreover, he only partially published himself (Holl 2004).² Yet in retrospect, Humboldt’s reflexions also in this respect bear witness to a tremendous innovation in the views that were common sense in “Europe” at the time. Not even in the humanistic discourse of the day, the conviction was obsolete that humankind could be divided into “higher and lower races.” And even Humboldt himself had let this view be echoed in some of his early notes.³ It took him an ample amount of personal encounters and observations of social conditions on his travels before he surprised his contemporaries by stating the unity of the human species.

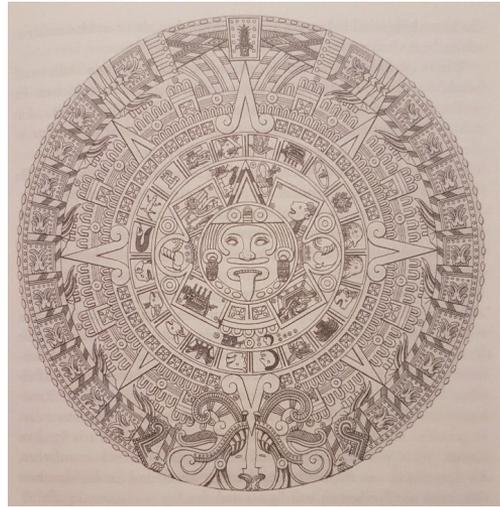


Figure 2: A Mexican calendar, which for Humboldt built the epitome of a highly advanced antique culture (from Wulf 2015, p. 129)

All peoples, so his dictum then, are equally destined to freedom.⁴ As evident by artefacts, he considered humans in all parts of the world capable of culture and education (*Bildung*). And he went beyond a mere ethical commitment to equality and denounced the—so one might say today—responsibility of “Western” societies for creating inequality and misery in other parts of the world. He became a sharp critic of colonialism and stated that the colonial powers had an interest in the impoverishment of the colonized peoples. “The larger

² Cf. Frank Holl (14.2.2004): Alexander von Humboldt—“Geschichtsschreiber der Kolonien”. In: Goethezeitportal. http://www.goethezeitportal.de/db/wiss/ahumboldt/holl_kolonialismus.pdf (retrieved 01.11.2019)

³ Hans Sarkowitz et al. (2019): Alexander von Humboldt—Der unbekannt Kosmos. Feature in 8 chapters. Chapter: *Die Einheit des Menschengeschlechts*. Hörverlag HR2 Kultur.

⁴ “Indem wir die Einheit des Menschengeschlechtes behaupten, widerstreben wir auch jeder unerfreulichen Annahme von höheren und niederen Menschenracen. Es giebt bildsamere, höhere gebildete, durch geistige Cultur veredelte, aber keine edleren Volksstämme. Alle sind gleichmäßig zur Freiheit bestimmt; zur Freiheit, welche in roheren Zuständen dem Einzelnen, in dem Staatenleben bei dem Genuß politischer Institutionen der Gesammtheit als Berechtigung zukommt.”—Alexander von Humboldt (1845): *Kosmos*, Erster Band. Stuttgart & Tübingen (J. G. Cotta’scher Verlag), S. 385.

the colonies are, the more consistent the European governments are in their political malice, the more the immorality of the colonies must increase.”⁵ It is noteworthy that he went beyond ethical positioning and observation-based assessment by considering how this “immoral” situation could be brought to light and what possibilities there were to change it. In his respective considerations, he referred to insights into education and language which he found in the works of his brother Wilhelm. Both brothers considered education in general, but especially language education as appropriate means for understanding and respectfully recognising diversity in the encounter with “the other.” Language education was not merely understood in a pragmatic sense, i.e. as the guidance to the use of the “own” as well as “foreign” languages. Rather, Wilhelm von Humboldt (and in accord with him also Alexander) saw in-depth “comparative language studies” as a path to knowledge and wisdom, awareness and recognition—of the “self” as well as of the “other.”

The time for my contribution is too short to outline the twists and turns that this conception has experienced in the European, namely the German, context. The following is an actually inadmissibly short version of the story. The Humboldts' reflections on the unity of the human species and on a general education conducive to this idea were driven by a cosmopolitan sentiment. But over the

course of the 19th century, this perspective did not prevail in social practice and in the emerging systems of nation states in Europe and their general education systems. Instead, the view of *superior and inferior nations* has become prevalent, which in their respective linguistic textures were considered to be monolingual quasi by nature (Gogolin, 2008).

Living in a diverse world

It does not take much research to realise that fundamental views such as those exposed and denounced as “immoral” by Alexander von Humboldt are still—or perhaps even increasingly—relevant today. But unlike Humboldt and his contemporaries, today almost nobody has to travel far and dangerously to experience the diversity of people. For almost everyone this is an experience to be made in the immediate environment. As it was often the case in history, dangerous journeys are today demanded of many who do not strive for discovery but fight for survival. And these “travellers” contribute to the experience of diversity by those who can afford a sedentary lifestyle, but also mobility when they feel like it. As has historically been the case, inequality is cause as well as consequence of this constellation.

The reality of today's societies is substantially influenced by mechanisms which foster the diversification of diversity. Not the only, but important factors driving this constellation are increasing individual mobility (an element of this is migration) as well as globalization. As I mentioned, this development is by no means new. What is new, however, is the speed and complexity of the process we face today, not least due to technical developments and powered by transnational economic interests. Today, we witness increasing numbers of net out- and in-flows in many

⁵ My translation of: “Je größer die Kolonien sind, je konsequenter die europäischen Regierungen in ihrer politischen Bosheit sind, umso stärker muß sich die Unmoral der Kolonien vermehren.” Faak, Margot (1982): Alexander von Humboldt: *Lateinamerika am Vorabend der Unabhängigkeitsrevolution. Eine Anthologie von Impressionen und Urteilen, aus seinen Reisetagebüchern zusammengestellt und erläutert*. Berlin (Akademie-Verlag). Quoted from Holl 2004, op.cit.

areas of the world, multiplied migration channels, and immigration status. Migrants represent increasing numbers of countries of origin, of languages, religions, concepts of gender, age, space and place, and practices of transnationalism. Steven Vertovec offered “super-diversity” as a heuristic “summary” term. It should encapsulate a range of changing variables surrounding migration patterns—and, significantly, their interlinkages. Today, these amount to a recognition of complexities that supersede previous patterns and perceptions of migration-driven diversity.” (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015).

Just for illustration, I briefly refer to some figures from Germany. Actually, people from about 190 countries of origin live in Germany and contribute to the economic, social, linguistic and cultural diversification of the population. According to official counts (i.e. by the US government), fewer than 200 sovereign states exist worldwide. Thus, we can put it in short: People from almost everywhere in the world live in Germany. In the bigger cities of the country, roughly 50 per cent of newborns have parents with a migrant background (first or second generation). Different from the Australian situation, no census data is available on language diversity in Germany, but is more than likely that a large proportion of children and youth live in more than one language at home. And given the fact that roughly 7000 languages exist in the world (according to Ethnologue, www.ethnologue.com), it is most likely that several hundreds of them are spoken in German cities—just as they are in Sydney or Melbourne ...

So we live in a state of diversity on our own doorstep that Alexander von Humboldt would never have imagined. His fundamental observation, however, that there is a lack

of recognition of diversity and a lack of fair and equitable ways of dealing with it, is by no means outdated—at least not in Germany and other European migration countries. This can be shown by a number of indicators, denoting inequality of persons who are attributed as being “strange[rs].” They experience unequal treatment in the workforce, in apartment or house hunting, in educational success—to mention just some examples. According to relevant research, the disdain for languages and their speakers as well as the unwillingness to communicate across language boundaries are among the significant causes of the perpetuation of inequality (Piller, 2016).

In educational research on migration, to which I attribute myself, attempts are being made to clarify whether it would not be worthwhile to take up the original observations and considerations of the Humboldts once again—approaches that have never been given the benefit of being consistently translated into societal practice. A starting point for revisiting is the reversal of the signs in views of language (and social, cultural ...) diversity: from negative (as it is actually common sense) to positive, as Alexander and Wilhelm considered it to be. Alexander von Humboldt did not regard the indigenous peoples of the countries he visited as “barbaric” (as it was common in Europe), but was impressed by the diversity of their cultures, beliefs and languages. He admitted that diversity sometimes caused inconvenience—for example in situations in which he needed a whole group of translators in order to transfer his questions from one of the local languages into the manifold others. Nevertheless, he maintained his openness and curiosity about the diversity of expression—just as he, together with

his brother, was convinced of the creative power and cognitive potential of language differences. In understanding the “diversity of human language construction,”⁶ both brothers saw an entrance ticket for all members of a society to gain the chance of equal participation in its social goods. And they saw it as the responsibility of public educational systems—which of course still had to be developed—to open up precisely this possibility to all of the children and young people living in a society.

Alexander von Humboldt was convinced that the international community of scientists was capable of overcoming all “wars and national interests;” and that their findings could contribute to a world of greater equity and justice. I am grateful for the chance to be part of this event and share my thoughts in the spirit of Humboldt.

⁶ Wilhelm von Humboldt (1836): Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts. Berlin (Druckerei der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, in Commission bei F. Dummler).

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