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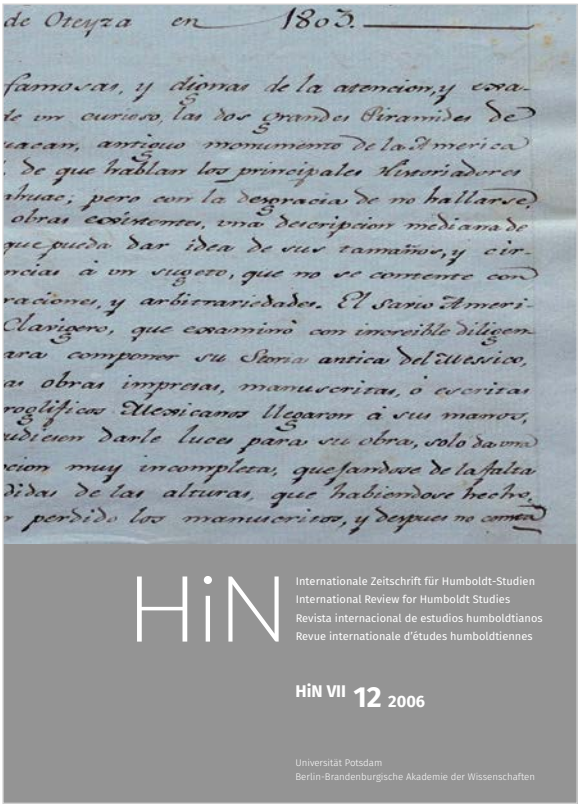

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A Metabiography of Alexander von Humboldt

Nicolaas A. Rupke

Abstract

The author's recently published monograph on Alexander von Humboldt* describes the multiple images of this great cultural icon. The book is a metabiographical study that shows how from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present day Humboldt has served as a nucleus of crystallisation for a variety of successive socio-political ideologies, each producing its own distinctive representation of him. The historiographical implications of this biographical diversity are profound and support current attempts to understand historical scholarship in terms of memory cultures.

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* Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: a Metabiography*. Frankfurt am Main [etc.]: Lang, 2005.

A Metabiography of Alexander von Humboldt

Nicolaas A. Rupke

The reader may be forgiven for not knowing what „metabiography“ means, because the word is a neologism. A „metabiography“ tells the story of a life by recounting how groups of biographers have previously represented that life. The term should not be confused with Hayden White's „metahistory,“ which says that historical narratives can be understood in terms of literary genres, such as romance, comedy, tragedy or satire. „Metabiography“ has much in common with reception history, yet goes further in its historiographical claims. Whereas reception theory presupposes a „Ding an sich,“ which is then received, metabiography acknowledges that the very telling of a past life invariably and inevitably changes the object of the story. How this happens is illustrated by the example of Alexander von Humboldt.

Let me sharpen the focus of the issue by posing the following questions. When we write about our past scientific heroes, do we connect with the essential person? Is it possible to recover through critical research and in the form of biographical narrative the essential person behind the myth? Or are we engaged in a more complex process that involves appropriation, whereby the life, work and impact of our heroes and antiheroes are told and retold as building blocks of contemporaneous socio-political institutions? Against the background of this conundrum, my book examines how Humboldt has been portrayed in the biographical literature by his fellow Germans, in the course of the various periods of German political history, starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, while Humboldt was still alive, and ending with today's period of post-reunification. The representations Humboldt, it appears, have invariably constituted forms of „presentist“ appropriation, with partial recoveries of the historical person at best, in a succession of distinct portraits, each the product of an identifiable institutional and socio-political culture. Limiting my exploration to the „German Humboldts,“ I show that with each major shift in politics, a new image of Humboldt was created. Successive periods of German political history crafted their very own Humboldt, and, at times of political pluralism, more than one. Humboldt has been appropriated and made a citizen of each consecutive Germany and, more specifically, a member and supporter of the particular group that produced the Humboldt literature of that period.

Some six major, distinct Humboldt representations can be identified. We recognize a Humboldt who played a role in the revolutionary struggle for „freedom and national unification“ („Freiheit und Einheit“) of Germany during the period 1848-71. When some twenty-five larger and smaller German kingdoms and principalities had merged to become the *Kaiserreich*, several versions were created of a distinctly Wilhelmian Humboldt, who could carry the banners of Germany's army in World War I and serve the purpose of post-WW I reconstruction during the Weimar Republic. In the Third Reich the National Socialists recast Humboldt to suit their supremacist ideology. He acquired a split personality when, after World War II, East and West Germany produced opposing Humboldts, one a Marxist-Leninist, the other a free market internationalist. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, Humboldt assumed an altogether new identity, that of a supranational information network pioneer and a supporter of popular causes ranging from environmentalism to gay rights.

Thus the literature about Humboldt reveals a striking plasticity of the historical record in the form of a plurality of differing and in some instances opposing representations of him, each expressive of the interests of biographers in a particular world of German political history. Humboldtians have used various discursive and narrative devices to format their hero's life, at times developing entirely new modes of describing and evaluating Humboldt. Many nationalists downplayed or ignored Humboldt's travels and French-language *oeuvre*, turning *Kosmos* into the signifier of his writings, which facilitated Germanizing him and appropriating his life and work for causes that ranged from national unification to supremacist expansionism. Similarly, they saw Humboldt's relocation from Paris to Berlin in 1827 as a fateful moment of destiny and played it up. Humboldt's debt to the Jena-Weimar tradition of Goethe and Schiller, early on described by some of the Forty-eighters, was brought into further prominence by disciples of the

Leipzig Circle's Karl Lamprecht who at the same time showed little interest in his American journey, which, by contrast, was viewed by some as the defining feature of his accomplishment when German politics began projecting itself into the Latin-American world. The brief tail-end of Humboldt's journey to Philadelphia and Washington was by and large ignored until it gained major significance in the context of West Germany's relationship with the USA. Also particular friendships have been used to link Humboldt to partisan causes, for example with Moses Mendelssohn and Henriette Herz, which substantiated his philo-Semitism. A perennial theme has been the friendship Goethe-Humboldt, the retrospectively invented twosome of Germany's science-and-art tradition, which, like the fraternal relationship Alexander-Wilhelm, functioned as a projection screen for a variety of causes.

Using these and other representational devices, different groups have been able to lay claim to Humboldt – nationalists and internationalists, fascists and communists, militarists and pacifists, moderates and radicals, hetero- and homosexuals, physical and social geographers, and more. Thus Humboldt has proven attractive as a platform for the discussion of German identity. His life and work have become a forum for defining significant aspects of Germanness, enabling Germans to deal with national ambitions, shortcomings, guilt complexes and the like. For Humboldt's biographers, the question of who he was took on the significance of who „we," the German people, were and are or, conversely, the way in which „Humboldt" was represented reflected the way „we," the German people, like to be seen. He is a crucial figure from the national past, whose memory has helped mediate the relationships of Germans with non-Germans and German attitudes towards the rest of the world. Humboldt was seen as an intermediary in the case of France and Germany, of the Americas and Europe, and even of Eurasia and Central and Western Europe, making it possible to draw from a discussion of where he stood a conclusion about where Germans should place themselves. Humboldt's life and work proved ideal as a national „agora," shaping a discourse not only about the world abroad, but also at home, within Germany, between the German people and its royal rulers, between revolution and reaction, between science and the humanities, between the professional and the amateur approach, between fascism and communism, as well as between a nationalist and a cosmopolitan political philosophy.

The „many Humboldts of the secondary literature" corroborate the significance of readerships, to which reception studies and the more recent „geography of knowledge" approach have drawn attention; yet metabiography goes further. A stronger claim is made here than that the meaning of a scientific life is determined by how it is received. Humboldt was not merely read in different ways; his life and *oeuvre* were far more aggressively recreated to suit contemporaneous needs. Each Humboldt representation bears the marks, not just of the biographer's interests and values or those of the period and the place of her/his existence, but of institutional constraints that are shared by groups of biographers, tending to turn their biographical writings into self-confirming appropriations of the past and self-sustaining building blocks. It is a trivial observation that there are as many subtly distinct Humboldt representations as there are Humboldt biographers. Less trite, however, is that the Humboldts of my study appear to be collective constructions – not merely individual readings – of Humboldt, and appropriations by groups of authors who in speaking with a similar voice were subject to shared institutional constraints.

Humboldt biography was constitutively linked to a range of institutions that included those of the revolutionary politics of 1848, the Monist movement, the Leipzig Circle, the foreign office and its Ibero-American foundations, the Central Office for the History of German Individuals and Families under Nazi domination, the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin/the Academy of Sciences of the GDR, and the Humboldt Foundation and Society in the FRG. When the institutional accommodation of interest in Humboldt changed, so did the representation of him, as when the Bismarckian Empire was founded, the Weimar Republic was followed by the Third Reich, the Nazi era was succeeded by East and West Germany, or again when the communist East collapsed to give way to a reunified Federal Republic. When changes in the political culture from one period to the next occurred gradually, Humboldt representations likewise changed gradually; when sudden, Humboldt also changed abruptly, being appropriated on behalf of wholly new political constituencies.

These observations have a bearing on recent debates about the practice and writing of history, debates provoked by the post-modernist challenge that during the past two decades has confronted the humanities

including scientific biography. The issues include, but are by no means limited to, the way we frame historical questions, our attempts to capture past meaning, and the relationship of these to ideology, politics and power. My study supports those who have argued that the writing of history or even the conduct of research cannot take place above the quotidien rough and tumble of ideology and politics. Each generation writes its own histories and asks its own questions. Moreover, within a generation each party, each constituency, each cause writes its version of contemporary history and brings the past to bear on it. The questions we ask come from contemporaneous anxieties and interests. The first generation of Humboldt biographers was preoccupied with the unification of the highly fractured German-speaking world. The most recent generation depicts Humboldt in way that gives expression to its concern with globalisation.

Thus Humboldt metabiography joins forces with recent writings by those who regard historical scholarship as a form of memory culture, bound and shaped by vested interests, professional methods, intended audiences, socio-political locations, commemorative practices, and sites of remembrance. This „Gedächtnisgeschichte" rejects Leopold von Ranke's „wie es gewesen" and the British empiricist tradition alike. Scientific biography will never be able to depict a great scientist as he/she really was or tell the „true story" and the „definitive account." This does not mean that „anything goes" and that a complete relativism rules; but it does mean that even the very best of biographical scholarship can not go beyond being one of several approaches to a past life. Nor does it have to lead to resignation and scepticism. As Otto Gerhard Oexle argues,[1] the metatheoretical ambiguity of the world makes possible a plurality of dialogues in a confluence of complementarities, differences, antagonisms, and in a meeting of cultures and their different interpretations of the world.

* * *

Endnoten

[1] Otto Gerhard Oexle, „Begriff und Experiment. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Natur- und Geschichtswissenschaft" in Vittoria Borsò and Christoph Kann (eds), Geschichtsdarstellung. Medien – Methoden – Strategien. Cologne/Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau, 2004, pp. 19-56, on p. 56.