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**To Grasp the Whole World:  
Politics and Aesthetics Before and  
After Alexander von Humboldt**

**Edited by**

**Soraya Nour Sckell  
and Damien Ehrhardt**



**Duncker & Humblot · Berlin**

SORAYA NOUR SCKELL / DAMIEN EHRHARDT (Eds.)

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Before and After Alexander von Humboldt

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# Introduction

*Soraya Nour Sckell and Damien Ehrhardt*

Alexander von Humboldt aimed “to grasp the whole world”. He searched the unknown to explain that which was close but incomprehensible as a result of being seen in isolation from the network to which it belongs. All natural, cultural and social phenomena are interrelated and should be studied as a whole that can never be abstracted from the singular. Contrary to a hierarchical scientific methodology based on a first principle that supports the whole, Humboldt conceives a complex network in which each element is equally important, despite having unique dimensions and logic. Humboldt’s natural studies, classifications, and measurements, as well as his social, artistic, cultural, political and economic research, make up a theory of the cosmos that connects all of these different spheres.

Humboldt conceives of a close connection between the singular case and the scientific law, between the feelings that nature provokes in us and the science of nature, and between history and nature. There is a strict relationship between both *Geist* and *Natur* and *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft*. The difference between *Natur* and *Geist*, and between *Natur* and *Kunst*, should not lead to the constitution of independent fields that obscures their interconnection. Since science begins with the mind and reason organizing elements of experience, *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft* are intrinsically related. There is a connection between the scientific description of nature in the natural frameworks of the cosmos (*Naturgemälde*) and the poetic description of nature expressed in the imagination and in landscape paintings.

This book joins researchers from several areas that reflect on the meaning of “the whole world”, not only in keeping with Humboldt’s legacy (Part I), but also according to other political scientists before and after Humboldt (Part II) and from the perspective of culture and the arts (Part III).

## **Part I: Alexander von Humboldt’s legacy**

In Chapter 1, *Science and “transreality” in Humboldt’s Cosmos*, Damien Ehrhardt & H  l  ne Fleury analyse how in spite of being an Enlightenment scientist who was continually observing, measuring, and describing the world while making major discoveries, Alexander von Humboldt is mostly recognized today as the father of biodiversity and a figurehead of interculturality and interdisciplinarity. The Humboldtian vision of the cosmos, characterized by its unity in diversity, is close to our

contemporary ecological and planetary thought. His philosophy is based on the main currents of thought of his time in the West (the Enlightenment and *Naturphilosophie*), but also takes into account developments from the American continent. Throughout his journey to the New World, Humboldt was cultivating an in-depth knowledge of the entire cultural and natural field. Furthermore, on his trip to Russia and Central Asia, he became familiar with other regions of the world, although his search for knowledge focused on the sciences over cultural and social phenomena. His dream of travelling to India never came true, so he investigated this region via information disseminated by his brother and other Sanskrit philologists rather than through immediate fieldwork. The situation would certainly have been very different had he had the opportunity to go there. Nonetheless, as a specialist in several natural and cultural areas that he studies through a comparative lens, Humboldt may be considered a representative of “transareality”, a notion that combines Ottmar Ette’s “TransArea”, Glissant’s “mondiality” and Spivak’s “planetary”. Humboldt’s approach brings together diverse regions of the world, but also different fields of knowledge that generally do not find themselves united: science and aesthetics, cosmopolitics, physical descriptions of the world and geopoetics. As such, Ehrhardt and Fleury show how the actualisation of Humboldt’s vision may prove crucial for our own society as we face the challenges of the planet.

This actualisation of Humboldt’s worldview is also proffered in Chapter 2. In their text *Cosmos, Citizenship and Justice*, Irene Maria Portela & Domingos Vieira analyse how traversing Humboldt’s scientific thought reveals that space, place and cosmos are fundamental to scientific learning. The geography of historical, economic and social facts always appears through local incarnations, so its knowledge production always has epistemological consequences in the construction of theories as it attempts to explain the real and its complexity.

In Chapter 3, João Motta Guedes’ text *The aesthetics of the political image: analysing the paintings of Rugendas after Humboldt* studies some paintings produced by Rugendas during his expeditions through Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to explain how his works hold a juridical-political meaning. Furthermore, he analysis the pictorial themes that comprise the object of Rugendas paintings. In particular, he discusses the canvases that illustrate various episodes of the social and colonial history of Latin America, exploring such themes as the confrontation between natives and Europeans and pointing to severe violations of human rights.

In Chapter 4, Elena Soboleva’s text *From Timor to Brazil with the support of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung* analyses ethnographic collections from different Lusophone countries that appear in several museums around the world. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung supported several scientific expeditions. Some of the travellers (namely Otto Finsch, Karl von Steinen, Georg Thilenius) shared their ethnographic collections with specialised museums, including the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (or MAE) in St. Petersburg. The Timorese collections were discovered in many European and American muse-

ums, with the ones in Moscow dating back to 1862. In 2019, images of some Timorese items from the MAE were on display at the traveling exhibition in Timor Leste. Art products from Portuguese Asia are being identified in many Russian art museums. Elements of Portuguese heritage in South and East Asia were exhibited in the collections of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, as well as in some other institutions of the Russian Academy of Science. The materials of the First and Second Russian scientific expeditions to Brazil are now spread between many museums and archives. The objects collected by Georg Langsdorff (1821–1828) and Heinrich Manizer (1914–1915) for Russia are analogous to the ones they donated to the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, thus making it possible to reconstruct the character of those collections lost in the fire in 2018. The Brazilian Diary of Heinrich Manizer, who stayed with the *Indios Botocudos* for roughly eight months, has been published in full in Russian by the MAE.

## Part II: Politics

The second part of this book is focused on political questions. In Chapter 5, Claus Zittel and Soraya Nour Sckell's contribution, *Historiography as Critique of Ideology: The Legacy of Hobbes in International Relations Theory*, analyses how Hobbes merges theoretical and historical inquiry. It discusses how his approaches have influenced the theory of international relations and the extent to which they solve contemporary problems in this discipline. Firstly, they analyse how Hobbes justifies his method of thinking both historically and theoretically. His historiography, which shows that human psychology is constant and the conquests of civilisation are transient, stands in opposition to evolutionary theory, which sees in the course of history the irreversible progress of humanity. They then analyse the role of this evolutionary conception in the so called "idealism" (or normative approaches) of the inter-war years, before it is called into question in the face of the horrors of the Second World War. Hobbes' work is later rehabilitated by the revision of "idealism" and the emergence of the doctrine known as "realism", both of which aim to criticise the evolutionary conception of early idealism. Finally, considering the contemporary debate in international relations, Zittel and Nour Sckell present two analyses: firstly, they discuss how neo-realism, which primarily investigates power technologies, departs from the mode of historical inquiry that was present in classical realism; secondly, they interrogate how normativism, which became prominent in the 1990s and formulates a justified criticism of the lack of ethical reflection in neo-realism, often produces evolutionist accounts of history. In both cases, there is a lack of historical inquiry that results in a lack of analysis regarding the contingency of social relations. If neither the predominantly psychological character of Hobbes' historiography nor the predominantly institutional character of his state and law theory can continue to be accepted, they ask how his method of simultaneously thinking theoretically and historically can challenge us.