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# Ethnography and liberty: a new look at the anthropological work of Wilhelm von Humboldt

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## ABSTRACT


This article introduces the reader to the hitherto hardly noticed ethnographic work of the renowned Prussian intellectual and politician Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). Humboldt is best known for his theoretical contributions to various fields of study, including anthropology and liberalism. Complementing this predominant view, the article focuses on Humboldt's observations during his travels and stays abroad, thus showing that he also conducted empirical research. Humboldt's accounts of the French, Spaniards, and Basques are interpreted against the background of his liberal anthropology. In this way, the article shows that Humboldt gained new anthropological insights through ethnographic research, especially about liberal constitutions and the connections between body and mind, and between individual and community. This new look at Humboldt's anthropological work also throws a light on the relationship between anthropology and liberalism, which is often regarded as problematic in more recent publications. The article thus contributes not only to the history of anthropology, but also to current discussions on the crisis of liberalism.

## KEYWORDS

Wilhelm von Humboldt; body and mind; individualism and communitarism; Enlightenment; anthropology and liberalism

## Introduction

Hidden behind mountains, a tribe lives on both sides of the Western Pyrenees that has retained its original language, and, in large part, its former constitution and customs. [...] Even if today they are torn into two very uneven parts and subordinate to two great and powerful nations, the Basques have nonetheless never given up their liberty and independence. Not mixing with their neighbors and resilient to the advancement of luxury and refinement, they have preserved a state of original simplicity regarding their costumes, have ceaselessly retained the idiosyncrasies of their national character, and, moreover, have kept the old spirit of freedom and independence for which already Greek and Roman authors had praised them. [...] The Basques are taken with an enthusiasm for their country and nation – which may appear slightly odd to the foreigner – to such an extent that even the more wealthy Basques, including those who receive honors and titles in Castile or hold prestigious offices, remain devoted to their home country. Here they live in very close relation with the vast masses of the people as they cannot cut themselves off from the prevailing costumes

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and language. In this way, parts of the newer Enlightenment and education flows into the people's vernacular and their terminology, and dissociation between the classes is less obvious; in fact, in the eyes of a true Basque these differences are entirely negligible. (Humboldt 2013, 5–6; 10)

These are the opening lines of an ethnographic account about the Basque people, written in the beginning of the nineteenth century by the Prussian aristocrat Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). This account is quite remarkable, not only for the vivid descriptions of the country and its customs and the linguistic analyses it contains, but also for at least three other reasons.

First, Humboldt is well known for his achievements in various fields of study (classical studies, state theory, theory of the sexes, aesthetics, language theory, to name the most significant ones) and his work as a Prussian politician (most notably, reformer of the educational system in 1809/10 and diplomat at the Congress of Vienna in 1814/15). In contrast, his ethnographic writings have gone widely unnoticed so far. To this day, only a few accounts have been given: Vick (2007), as a historian, looks at Humboldt's studies of the ancient Greeks and the Basques and relates them to his political work; the philosopher Zabaleta-Gorrotxategi (2013, 2006) analyses the turn from encompassing ethnography to linguistics in Humboldt's studies of the Basques; and I, as an educationalist, consider Humboldt's observations of the French, the Spaniards, and the Basques in regard to his educational reforms (Mattig 2019).

To anthropology, Humboldt is also not a stranger. In Germany, Humboldt is still today being praised for his anthropological idea of *Bildung* (e.g. Wulf 2001, 56–75; Zenkert 2017) and his contributions to linguistic anthropology (e.g. Brenner 2017; Trabant 2012). Regarding Anglophone anthropology, the thoughts of Wilhelm von Humboldt and his famous younger brother Alexander had significant impact on the work of Boas and, therefore, on the Boasian school of anthropology (Bunzl 1996). Moreover, Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of language reappeared in the work of Sapir and Whorf (Koerner 1992). By paving the way for cultural and linguistic relativism, Humboldt can thus be seen as an important ancestor of American Anthropology. Even in anthropological accounts, however, Humboldt is portrayed either as a theorist or a linguist (or both), but not as an empirical researcher; his ethnographic work in the stricter sense of the term has not yet been discovered. Thus, in this paper I aim at describing Wilhelm von Humboldt's ethnographies for anthropologists, arguing that he conducted his ethnographic studies with a clear anthropological purpose.

This purpose is, second, remarkable in itself. In his ethnographies, Humboldt did not only observe traditional culture, but also the 'diffusion of enlightenment' (2013, 93). In a more general sense, his anthropological interest was directed at liberty, as the introductory quote already indicates. The relationship between anthropology and liberalism, however, is not self-evident and needs comment. As Ansell (2019) states in a broad literature review, there has long been a 'love-hate relationship' between both fields of study. On the one hand, anthropologists are 'proponents of other cultures' dignity' and therefore advocate multiculturalism and a 'pluralist public sphere'. On the other hand, they reject several basic liberal assumptions like the universality of rationality, individuality, and progress. 'Inspired by either perspective', Ansell concludes, 'anthropologists constituted their field as the study of all that is illiberal 'out there' in the world.' Just think of Boas, Mead or Malinowski, for example.

In liberalism, again, Wilhelm von Humboldt is well known. As a young man, he wrote an essay on political theory entitled *The Sphere and Duties of Government* (another translation is

*The Limits of State Action*) that had a sustained influence on liberal thought. Maybe the most important impact was on Mill, who in *On Liberty* from 1859 mentions Humboldt's essay as main inspiration for his work.<sup>1</sup> In a seminal study on liberal thought in Germany, Beiser distinguishes a 'rationalist' from a 'humanist' liberalism and names Humboldt as a major proponent of the 'humanist' version (while especially Kant and Fichte represent the 'rationalist' one). According to Beiser, Humboldt's liberalism followed an 'ethic of perfection', whereby such ethic was 'based on an empirical anthropology rather than a metaphysics of pure reason' (1992, 112). Although Beiser does not refer to Humboldt's empirical work itself, his analysis hints that the above-cited opposition between anthropology and liberalism is not appropriate; rather, from a historical perspective, anthropology must itself be seen as part of the liberal project. As I argue in this article, Humboldt's essay *The Sphere and Duties of Government* as well as other of his early writings formed the theoretical background of the ethnographic fieldwork that he conducted some years later. I demonstrate that although Humboldt was deeply interested in 'traditional culture' (as Ansell states anthropologists are), he did not study 'illiberal' peoples. Rather, being puzzled by the problem of how the spreading of enlightenment and the preservation of 'national characters' could both be accomplished, he looked for liberal peoples in traditional cultures.

Third, Humboldt did not find this combination neither in France nor in Spain or Germany, but only in the Basque nation – a nation that was regarded by many contemporaries as 'raw' and 'uncultivated' (Hurch 2010, 10). I show that the Basques gave him a key for solving the anthropological puzzle that he had developed in his early writings. Moreover, through his ethnographic research, Humboldt found new, more communitarian ways for thinking about liberty and thus significantly modified his theoretical considerations. It is only against the background of his liberal anthropology, that his ethnographies and his fascination for the Basques can be fully appreciated.

In the following, I first outline the historical context in which Humboldt's work must be understood. Here, the common origin of liberalism and anthropology in the Enlightenment will be laid out. Second, Humboldt's early liberal considerations will be sketched. This section shows that Humboldt developed a specific anthropological framework for thinking about freedom that led to a central anthropological puzzle and subsequent dilemmas. Third, I portray Wilhelm von Humboldt's ethnographic studies of the French, the Spanish, and the Basque national characters. His observations will be traced case by case so that the development of his theoretical thoughts becomes clear. Main points of focus will be Humboldt's insight into the importance of the body; social practices; and political constitutions for liberty. It is particularly this emphasis that qualifies Humboldt's observations as ethnographic even from today's perspective. In the final section, I point out that some of Humboldt's anthropological thoughts on liberty are still worth considering given the actual crisis of liberalism.

I should say in advance that whenever I quote Humboldt's observations of the French, the Spanish, or the Basque people, I do not evaluate their empirical validity. Moreover, all translations from German sources are my own.

### **Humboldt's liberalism and anthropology in historical perspective**

Humboldt lived in a time of significant intellectual developments and political changes in Europe, usually referred to as the era of Enlightenment (Beiser 1992). A major struggle of

the second half of the eighteenth century was the emancipation from the shackles of the church, the absolutist state, and the feudal social system. Enlightenment philosophers held that the self-determination of human beings should be accomplished through the human capacity of reason. The intellectual liberal efforts became politically relevant especially in the French Revolution in 1789 with its cry for 'liberté', 'égalité', and 'fraternité'.

The eighteenth-century enlightenment process included the rise of anthropology as a new way of study (Gingrich 2005, 64–75). Anthropological writings were concerned with questions about the nature of the human being and tried to deal with these questions empirically (as opposed to the speculative considerations of philosophy) (Trabant 2012). The major focus of anthropology was on what was called 'national characters'. Renowned authors such as Montesquieu, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Herder, and Kant gave attention to this topic, often relating anthropological reflections to political issues. The anthropological discourse was fed by travel writings that gave accounts of foreign peoples and often tried to also learn lessons for social reform at home (Liebersohn 1994). One of the most famous travel accounts of the time was *A Voyage Round the World* by Forster, a close friend of Humboldt.

A significant influence on German intellectuals was exerted by Rousseau who opened up a cultural criticism that became very powerful in anthropological inquiry since then. Rousseau lamented that while in former times there had been 'original' national characters, these characters gradually faded away with closer contact between nations and with the growth of cities. Whether you are in London or in Paris, Rousseau said, it is all the same (1921, 431). Therefore, he criticised the modern alienation of human beings and argued for the development of humanity's 'natural capacities' as a remedy. In his anthropological considerations, he pledged that it was necessary to look for 'true' or 'natural' national characters (1921, 432). As a consequence, many anthropological writings of the late eighteenth century stressed the need to strengthen national characters against their mixing with others or their being overturned by foreign influences. In Germany, intellectuals took up Rousseau's thoughts and criticised the hegemonic character of French culture and politics of the time insofar as European nations tended to adopt the French way of life and thereby lost their 'original' characters (Trabant 2008).

The intellectual discourses in the late eighteenth century were also inspired by references to Antiquity. Unlike in France, Great Britain or America, where the Romans were of greatest interest, German authors and scholars such as Wolf, Goethe and Schiller concentrated primarily on the ancient Greeks, who provided a historical model for the idea of *Bildung*: the holistic development of the person and the national character (Wehler 1989).

In sum, the anthropological considerations of that time had a complex liberal motif: freeing nations from religion and feudalism, and the hegemonic dominance of other nations. Socially speaking, however, only a small intellectual elite developed and discussed enlightenment issues. By the end of the eighteenth century, this elite had developed in Germany as a new social 'class' that was defined by its education rather than by birth. In contrast, the common people, i.e. the vast majority of the population, were preoccupied with hard work and could scarcely read nor write. They were, therefore, excluded from liberal discourses (Kocka 1989).

Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt grew up in the spirit of the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> From early age, Wilhelm studied the language and literature of the ancient Greeks. While Alexander focused more on what we call today natural sciences, Wilhelm took interest in anthropological and political issues. During their lifetime, both brothers travelled a lot. As a young man,

Wilhelm became witness of the revolutionary events in Paris during a trip in 1789 (Menze 2017). But although he embraced the values of the French Revolution, he believed that the Revolution itself would fail, and as an aftermath of his experiences he wrote *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, advocating reform rather than revolution. In the end of 1797, Wilhelm moved with his wife and children to Paris where they stayed for four years. These years can be called his ethnographic phase in the proper sense, not only because he carefully observed the French, but also because he undertook one travel to Spain and another to the Basque Country, where he conducted intensive fieldwork. During the years in Paris, Humboldt was also in close contact with French intellectuals like Degérando who were deeply interested in ethnographic issues (Trabant 2012, chapter 9). From 1802 to 1808, Humboldt lived in Rome, serving the Prussian state at the Holy See. After the Prussian defeat against Napoleon, liberal reforms were initiated in Prussia in 1806 with Humboldt being assigned by the Prussian King to reforming the educational system in 1809. In the following years, working as a Prussian diplomat in Vienna and London with different assignments, he contributed to the development of a constitution for the German states. After conservative backlashes, he quit his service for Prussia in 1819 and spent the last years of his life finally in Tegel near Berlin, where he focused particularly on the study of languages.

Many of Wilhelm von Humboldt's achievements were only noticed long after his death. One reason for this is that many of his texts were not published during his lifetime and came out later only little by little. *The Sphere and Duties of Government* for example, written in 1792, had only been published in German at full length in 1851 (Mill had referred to the English translation from 1854). Humboldt's extensive ethnographic account *The Basques* was first published in German in 1920; the first English translation in 2013. Another reason is that scholars have focused only on specific aspects of his work, leaving aside others at the time. Up to this day, most researchers were interested in Humboldt's theoretical and political considerations rather than in his empirical observations. This complex history of publication and reception of Humboldt's work makes it possible to still discover not yet considered aspects.

## Humboldt's basic liberal anthropology

Although Humboldt was deeply fascinated by the anthropological works of his time, he criticized contemporary anthropologists, especially because, in his eyes, they failed to take the human being 'as a whole' into account. In his early writings, he laid out a specific anthropological theory that became the basis for all his subsequent considerations, even until his late language studies. In this section, I outline this theory and then point out the problems and dilemmas that arose from it in Humboldt's eyes.

### *The free development of all human powers as an anthropological puzzle*

Throughout his life, Humboldt thought of the human being in terms of 'powers'. In a famous statement from *The Sphere and Duties of Government* he said:

The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. (1854, 11)

This is where Humboldt's liberalism comes in, because he thought that this development of 'powers' was only possible if two conditions were met, namely 'freedom' and 'a variety of situations'. This idea was bound to an individualistic outlook: Humboldt thought it was desirable that 'each individual [...] enjoys the most absolute freedom of developing himself by his own energies, in his perfect individuality' (1854, 18).

Speaking of 'powers' in the plural sense, Humboldt usually distinguished between intellectual, moral, imaginative, emotional, and bodily-sensual ones. While each individual had all of these powers, any particular one had a specific proportion of them. In a simple example, Humboldt distinguished individuals who are more intellectual from those who are more emotional (I, 68).<sup>3</sup> From his early writings on, Humboldt saw a conflict between the different powers of the human being, most of all between the sensual and the intellectual ones. In *The Sphere and Duties of Government* he wrote:

A constant endeavour to unite these two elements, so that each may rob as little as possible from the other, has always seemed to me the true end of wisdom. (1854, 103)

In his *Plan for a Comparative Anthropology* from 1795, he pointed out that the sensual and the intellectual powers were in a 'fight' with each other. While the bodily-sensual powers worked towards developing a rather stable 'habitus' in correspondence to the individuals' environment, the 'intellectual' and 'moral' powers enabled human beings to reflect rationally about technical or moral problems and to invent *new* ways of life – to which the sensual powers, however, tended to resist (I, 398).

Throughout his life Humboldt strove to understand the 'mysterious bond' (1854, 103) that connected the sensual with the spiritual powers of the human being; this was the central anthropological puzzle with which he struggled.

Surely, the question of the connection between body and mind can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy (Scheuerl 1982, 22–52); and for Humboldt, as for other humanists of his time (like his friends Goethe and Schiller), the Greeks were a historical model for a character who had developed a harmonious relationship between reason and passion. It is important to note that Humboldt did not advocate the development of cognitive capacities at the expense of others. He was not a rationalist. Rather, his humanist liberalism was based upon the insistence that each human power, even the bodily powers, should have the freedom to be developed, as long as a balance was maintained. It is precisely this idea that Beiser calls 'ethic of perfection', as quoted above.

From early on, Humboldt thought that this theory of 'powers' did not only apply to individuals, but also to collectives like national characters (I, 62). Therefore, he did not think of national characters as homogenous entities, but, again, as 'wholes' that organically consisted of different parts (or 'powers'). Furthermore, he thought that not only individuals and nations, but the whole of humanity should develop into a 'complete and consistent whole'. This was, for him, the cosmopolitan 'ideal of humankind' (I, 379).

Although in *The Sphere and Duties of Government* Humboldt gave several concrete political suggestions (Beiser 1992, 111), he remained rather general in regard to his anthropological theory. It is therefore somewhat unclear what his main anthropological puzzle – the problem of developing the sensual and the intellectual powers in such a way 'that each may rob as little as possible from the other' – might mean in relation to the empirical world. It may be due to this abstract character of his theory of 'powers' that so many differing interpretations have been given. Usually, it is understood in terms of individual

self-development. My following analysis differs from existing understandings not only in its accentuation of the ‘bodily’ powers (as they manifest, in gestures and costumes) but also in its focus on collective development. Both aspects come to the fore through paying attention to Humboldt’s ethnographic work.

### *Anthropological challenges and dilemmas*

At some points in his early writings, Humboldt broke down his thoughts about the development of human powers to some concrete challenges and even dilemmas. The questions arising from these considerations formed the background of his ethnographic studies.

In *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, Humboldt said that for developing a nation into ‘a complete and consistent whole’ it was necessary that no individual was excluded from the enlightenment process. In this sense, he argued enthusiastically for ‘Volksaufklärung’ (enlightenment of the people):

In estimating the advantages arising from increased freedom of thought and the consequent wide diffusion of enlightenment, we should [...] especially guard against presuming that they would be confined to a small proportion of the people only;—that to the majority, whose energies are exhausted by cares for the physical necessities of life, such opportunities would be useless or even positively hurtful, and that the only way to influence the masses is to promulgate some definite points of belief—to restrict the freedom of thought. There is something degrading to human nature in the idea of refusing to any man, the right to be a man. There are none so hopelessly low on the scale of culture and refinement as to be incapable of rising higher; [...] and the happy results of perfect liberty of thought on the mind and character of the entire nation, extend their influence even to its humblest individuals. (1854, 93–94)

However, the ‘diffusion of enlightenment’ among the nation entailed an anthropological dilemma. For Humboldt, enlightenment meant that humankind developed its intellectual capacities by way of ‘inventions’ in a moral or technical sense (I, 74; 114). Yet such inventions could conflict with the traditions of national characters (which is most obvious in the case of folk superstition). The fundamental question here is whether a nation should cling to its traditions in order to keep its character alive (remember Rousseau advocating the importance of ‘original’ characters), or whether it should adopt the innovations of the Enlightenment – and thus risk losing its character. In both cases, either the intellectual or the sensual powers would ‘rob’ of the other powers. More than that, Humboldt thought of the Enlightenment as ‘European Enlightenment’ (XIII, 7) and thereby stressed its universal and transnational nature. Thus, if different nations adopted the intellectual insights, they risked becoming more and more alike through ‘fusion’ (I, 48). From this perspective, the enlightenment of the people would have a homogenizing effect, which made contemporary efforts of ‘Volkspädagogik’ (education of the people) problematic.

However, in empirical life, the common people were largely excluded from the Enlightenment, and Humboldt observed a growing social separation within nations between the ‘educated classes’ and the common people. The former easily associated with intellectuals from other countries and thereby gained a cosmopolitan perspective while at the same time distancing themselves from their national characters (II, 39–40). In Humboldt’s times, the *lingua franca* used in international contexts was French. Many intellectuals (as well as aristocrats) in Europe not only valued French as the language of the noble and educated classes, but also adopted French ways of life. The common people, on



the other hand, kept alive the old folk tales, songs, dances, vernaculars, etc. and therefore preserved the national characters. Yet, they had no access to the Enlightenment and therefore lacked intellectual powers. Here again, Humboldt's 'endeavour' to develop the intellectual and the bodily powers in such a way that each 'may rob as little as possible from the other' posed a concrete anthropological dilemma since this social separation between the educated classes and the common people meant that nations could not develop to 'a complete and consistent whole'.

Finally, the process of enlightenment implied the need to develop new – and written – liberal constitutions. Of course, written constitutions were a product of the 'intellectual' powers. Yet, for Humboldt, the relationship between constitution and national character was quite complex, not only because the national character included rational as well as irrational powers. For one thing, a nation's character was reflected in its constitution; for another, the constitution acted upon the national character (1854, 67; 70). From early on, he favored liberal constitutions. This becomes most clear in a study on the ancient Greeks from 1793 where he pointed out that the free 'republican' constitutions of the Greek states had a fortunate influence on the development of the Greeks' national character in a twofold sense: first, they gave the individuals freedom for self-determination, and second they made the individuals identify positively with their nation (I, 272). The constitutions of the Greeks thus promoted the free development of 'powers'. Naturally, the feudal and absolutist states in Europe of his time could not meet this ideal. Humboldt thought that contemporary national characters were 'dull' and 'slack' (I, 385). How, then, could liberal constitutions for modern states be developed?

In sum, although Humboldt was passionate about the Enlightenment, he realized that it posed major challenges in terms of his liberal anthropology. With this viewpoint, his look upon national characters was much more complex than the ones of other anthropological theorists of the time. Take, for example, Kant who, in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* from 1798 was very interested in the 'originality' of national characters; at the same time, however, throughout the book he repeated his normative claims about the Enlightenment in the sense that humankind should free itself by developing its intellectual capacities. Nowhere in his study did Kant see or even problematize the relationship between the originality of national characters and the progress of the Enlightenment.

Humboldt's early anthropological considerations were never meant to give lasting answers; rather, he laid out principles of a liberal anthropology that opened up dilemmatic questions, and he insisted on further research for finding solutions. Anthropological research, he claimed in his *Plan for a Comparative Anthropology*, should not only be 'speculative' (i.e. philosophical) but at the same time 'empirical' in the twofold sense that philosophical inquiry should be bound to empirical cases, while empirical research should be informed by philosophical considerations (I, 377–410). Therefore, he considered ethnographic research necessary and developed a sophisticated comparative method for fieldwork that focused on customs and gestures, language, physiognomy, and the study of literature (Mattig 2019, 152–173; Zabaleta-Gorrotxategi 2013, XXI–XXIV). During his travels in the end of the 1790s and in the beginning of the 1800s, he tried to get insights into the sketched anthropological challenges and dilemmas.

## The ethnographic quest for liberty: Humboldt's observations of the French, the Spaniards, and the Basques

As Geertz truly said, ethnographic research challenges the desire for 'generality, certainty, or intellectual equilibrium' (2000, 226). This is true also regarding Humboldt's ethnographic studies about the French, the Spanish, and the Basque national characters. Lacking theoretical systematization, they cover an abundance of topics so that a golden thread is hard to find. However, for the purpose of this paper, Humboldt's notes shall be outlined in such a way that they relate to the anthropological considerations laid out above. Thereby it will become clear that Humboldt, in his observations of the French and the Spanish national characters, did not find satisfactory answers to his anthropological questions, but was all the more enthusiastic about the Basques. In the Basque Country, his anthropological quest was finally successful.

### Observations in France

Like many other German intellectuals at the time, Humboldt was fascinated when the French Revolution began in 1789. France had been seen as forerunner in Enlightenment and cultural refinement, and the Revolution promised to bring forth the liberal yearnings. However, as said before, although Humboldt embraced the values of the Revolution, he also raised scepticism from early on. In 1792, he published a critical analysis of the new September 1791 French constitution in terms of his anthropological understanding: since the new French constitution aimed at building a 'whole new state system' on the 'mere principles of reason' (I, 78), it failed to recognise the concrete situation of the nation which was never shaped only by rational means but which was also always 'accidental' (I, 79). The constitution was unbalanced in that it neglected, and, therefore, weakened the sensual-bodily powers of the nation. Instead of fostering the strength of the French national character, it would result in 'limpness and inactivity' (I, 81). Therefore, when considering the new French constitution, Humboldt was worried that the liberal spirit that had been released during the Revolution would soon diminish. For him, any constitution would need to tie on to the specific and concrete situation of a national character in order to be accepted by the nation.

During the four-year stay in Paris, Humboldt constantly took ethnographic notes related to a wide variety of topics. In 1800, a remarkable essay entitled *About the Actual French Tragic Theatre* was published (II, 377–400). Being much more than just a theatre review, this essay gave a comparative ethnographic analysis of the French, the German, and the ancient Greek national characters. After describing the gestural expressions of theatre actors, he concluded that both the French and the Germans tended to be imbalanced in terms of human powers (Mattig 2019, 175–181).

Apart from aesthetics, Humboldt was also interested in enlightenment, politics and social practice in Paris. While he did not write a comprehensive study on this, his diary entries and letters depict at times harsh criticisms of the French. He criticised the educated people he met for their arrogant attitude, which was expressed in their belief that society would always need workers who carry water and log trees and therefore did not need to be educated in terms of enlightenment. In conclusion, Humboldt noted that 'through the enlightenment in our times the differences between the estates have become bigger than

they had been in the most aristocratic ones' (XIV, 580–581). Moreover, Humboldt lamented that the French had not maintained the 'precious enthusiasm' (Mattson 2015, 111) that he had praised in the beginning of the Revolution. For example, he observed a widespread disinterest in participation in republican affairs (which he, of course, also attributed to the revolutionary terror) (cp. XIV, 403; 557). Also, he thought that in France there was a high cultural refinement but no originality of character. For him, the French national character was not only out of balance, but also 'tainted' (Leitzmann 1892, 63).

Taking together his various accounts, it becomes clear that Humboldt was rather disappointed by the French national character, which, with its social separation, its imbalance of the human powers and the resulting 'limpness and inactivity', was far from forming a powerful 'complete and consistent whole'. Moreover, Humboldt also criticised the 'hegemony' of the French way of life in Europe, because other nations would try to imitate the cultural refinement of the French by way of contagion and in doing so would also move away from their original characters (II, 107–109). In France, therefore, Humboldt did not find a solution to the dilemmas of human liberty; instead, he found a confirmation of his concerns.

### *Observations in Spain*

The basis still in Paris, Humboldt and his family went on a round trip through Spain from August 1799 through April 1800. For Humboldt, this was, again, an opportunity to conduct ethnographic research. He took notes in his diary, wrote numerous letters about his observations and published two essays, one entitled *The Montserrat near Barcelona* (about the monastery and the hermits on the mountain Montserrat), the other *The Ancient Theatre in Sagunt* (III, 30–59; 60–113). However, Humboldt was, for the most part, disappointed again, although for different reasons than in France. In Spain, he deeply missed any progress of the Enlightenment. According to his observations, the country was still too much under the grip of the church and the Spanish Inquisition, which rendered freedom of thought impossible (cp. XV, 163). Moreover, in political terms, Spain, as a monarchy, lacked political liberty. In addition, Humboldt found that the intellectuals in Spain tried to mimic French culture and, therefore, did not identify with their original national character (Kappstein 1917, 137).

Nevertheless, in Spain Humboldt made an observation in social terms that had considerable impact on the development of his anthropological thoughts. In a letter to Goethe, he reported with astonishment that in Spain, compared to other European countries, 'in language and customs there prevails less distinction between the common people and the upper classes' (Bratranek 1876, 150–151). In other words, there was less social separation in Spain. Remarkably, Humboldt explained this observation with Spain being behind other nations in the cultural process. In some sense, then, he praised Spain for being behind, because 'there is no bigger partition between the different estates than that which is established by refined intellectual culture; and here, this partition is absent' (Bratranek 1876, 151). Comparing France and Germany to Spain concerning this refinement process, Humboldt pointed out that in France this 'partition' was higher than in Spain but lower than in Germany. In Germany, it was 'endlessly high': 'there is indeed an intellectual aristocracy; if you are not part of the caste, you can hardly understand even our most simple writers' (Bratranek 1876, 151).

Notably, he attributed this social ‘partition’ in Germany to the process of enlightenment insofar as it brought about a specific form of language, namely a written language with abstract concepts. In former times, the cultural process had been ‘slower and more sensual’ (Bratranek 1876, 151), meaning that communication had an oral character. Humboldt thus observed a subtle dialectics: on the one hand, many German intellectuals of his time tended to use the German language instead of French in order to not only emancipate themselves from the French language (which they criticised as aristocratic) but also to associate with the common people and to strengthen the national character. On the other, the intent of being down-to-earth was counteracted by the intellectuals’ social practice. In the second half of the eighteenth century, many of them came together in reading and debating circles, whose excluding character Humboldt came to realize in Spain: the ‘poor lay person’ had to stay outside ‘like in front of a locked armoire’ (Bratranek 1876, 151).

Remarkably, this reasoning about the ‘partition’ between the different social classes in Germany is echoed in the book *De L’Allemagne*, written by Humboldt’s French friend Mme. de Staël and first published in 1813 (De Staël 1985, 28).

It becomes clear that Humboldt’s ‘comparative anthropology’ was directed at getting insights that could be related to his home country. Surely, he was interested in advancing liberty in Germany. What he found in Spain was, altogether, unsatisfactory; however, in Spain, he appreciated the lack of social separation. Although the Spanish character had not developed its powers, it was, nevertheless, a ‘whole’.

### **Observations in the Basque Country**

In 1799, the Humboldt family crossed the Basque Country for some days during their roundtrip through Spain. Although this was a quite short time, Humboldt was electrified by the ‘strong’ and ‘original’ national character of the Basques. In the spring of 1801, he took an opportunity to travel again to the Basque Country by himself. There, he conducted two months fieldwork. Originally, he planned to write a four-part monograph about the Basques that should include a portrayal of the country and the customs; an analysis of the Basque grammar; an inquiry into the origin of the Basque nation; and an anthology of Basque words. This plan, however, was never realized. Humboldt finished writing up the first part – now known as *The Basques* – in 1805, when he was already working as a diplomat in Rome. At that time, he gained new interests; especially in Native American languages (receiving material from his brother who had by then returned from his American journey, and from the Jesuit priest Hervás). While *The Basques* was never published in his lifetime, Humboldt published other writings about the Basques in 1811, 1812, and 1821 that demonstrate that in his decades-long studies of the Basques his focus shifted from a comprehensive ethnographic perspective to a particular interest in language (cp. Zabaleta-Gorrotxategi 2006, 2013). For the purpose of this article, however, his initial ethnographic observations are of main interest.

As in France and Spain, Humboldt’s observations captured a wide array of topics. In the 163-page ethnography *The Basques*, he gives rather detailed thick descriptions of, among others, festivities, dances and games, the political constitutions of the different Basque Provinces, economic activities, folk tales and songs, differences between the sexes, and the spread of enlightenment. Yet, as unrelated as many of these different topics may seem at first, Humboldt draws theoretical conclusions from his observations that show

that the case of the Basques could provide him with answers concerning his above-sketched anthropological questions. Above all, Humboldt did not perceive the Basques as a ‘dull’ national character like the others he had studied in Europe, but as a ‘lively’ nation that had not only retained its ‘old spirit of freedom and independence’ (2013, 6), but that also embraced the Enlightenment’s freedom of thought. This statement needs to be qualified, however, since Humboldt distinguished between the French and the Spanish part of the Basques, attributing the ‘spirit of freedom’ mainly to the Spanish Basques, because the French part had lost much of its independence already under the French absolutist regime and, more recently, in the wake of the French Revolution.

### *Liberal constitutions*

In *The Basques*, Wilhelm von Humboldt paid considerable attention to constitutions. He took a particular interest in the *fueros nuevos*, the political constitutions of the three Spanish provinces Gipuzkoa, Araba, and Bizkaia and pointed out that the Spanish Basques, despite being integrated and, thereby, subordinated to the Spanish Monarchy, still had retained a relative autonomy and a substantial self-determination of the people in political terms.

According to the constitution of Gipuzkoa, for example, ‘[a]ll deciding powers regarding the administration of matters concerned with the province lay with the assembly of the town councils’ (2013, 39). In these councils, ‘both the chief delegate and the delegates of the district are elected’. According to his inquiries, each town sent one or two delegates to the general assemblies, whereby these delegates did not express their own opinions, but rather the decisions that had previously been made in their communities. Each town had a certain weighting of votes, according to the number of its heads of family. Therefore, for Humboldt, ‘The delegates are the true representatives of their power base in a most literal sense’ (2013, 39), because the voices of a town were ‘regarded as one collective voice’ (2013, 40). Enthusiastically, he concluded:

Thus one cannot suppose of a representative system here; it is a pure and utter democracy. No one lets his will be represented by someone more capable; everybody decides every matter for himself, and the delegate is merely the vehicle for the majority of votes in the borough. (2013, 40)

Throughout *The Basques*, Humboldt also pointed out that the *fueros nuevos* guaranteed social equality among the Basques. With regard to Bizkaia, for example, he noted that aristocracy was not banned; however, he praised what is today known as ‘universal nobility’:

Every Biskaian is aristocratic by birth, and must be recognized as such in other provinces of the kingdom. [...] Wealth and poverty, indeed even the way of life and comportment, make no difference here. [...] No other but this aristocracy counts at the people’s assemblies in Bizkaia, whoever bears the title of a count, a marquis, or even a duke in Castile or any other province, puts it down at this point and takes on his Basque name. [...] All genuine Bizkaians are thus fully equal, everyone is of nobility, and there is no lower or higher among them. (2013, 67–68)

Equality, here, does not refer to wealth but to political rights. Regarding the general assemblies of Bizkaia, Humboldt noted that ‘[t]here is no estate that is excluded from the office of chief delegate and even merchants have executed the office in recent times’ (2013, 136). He also observed that the Basques deeply identified with their constitution and their

nation. For him, it was ‘remarkable, what warm and unwavering devotion all these people from such diverse classes and with so many occupations have retained toward their homeland’ (2013, 52).

In summary, in the Basque Country Humboldt found liberal political constitutions that really worked, in contrast to the French constitution of 1791. On the one hand, the constitutions themselves were not only liberal but also profoundly rooted in the nation’s history; on the other, Humboldt observed that the nation was deeply committed to the constitutions (remember that the problem he found in France was that the 1791 constitution did not tie in with history, and that the French people he observed in the end of the 1790s were not committed to the Republic).

### Customs

In *The Basques*, Humboldt gave lengthy descriptions of festivities, dances and games. He was fascinated that the social equality that was written into the constitutions could also be found in such social practices. For him, the lively customs produced and maintained the strong common spirit of the Basques. To give an example, he wrote the following about the game *pelota*:

It is the Biscayans’ greatest enjoyment. Not only does every town have its own more or less luxuriously designed court, but everyone takes part in the game as well. Just as in everything in Biscay, but especially when it comes to playing ball, there is no difference in class, and on Sundays a great number of both sexes of the towns are present, the *alcaldes* and the clergy not excluded, watch the players and follow them amid vivid interest by applauding or by showing their disapproval. Whole towns challenge each other to ceremonious games. (2013, 55)

In the Basque country, like in Spain, Humboldt thus found that the educated individuals and the common people were close to each other in their daily life. However, unlike in Spain, he observed very lively traditional customs among the Basques, which proved for him the Basques’ ‘strong’ and ‘original’ national character. Regarding these customs, the Basques, in fact, represented high development of the sensual and bodily powers.

Unlike elsewhere, in Biscay such popular things (like dance and revelry) are not left to the private sphere, but are, in a sense, part of the constitution, subject to public supervision. They are steadfast traditions handed down, truly national, and, moreover, traditions that have a fixed form depending on the individual’s place of birth. The character of the Biscayans, for the most part, recurs on these very things, and it is these aspects of their character that are praised, in preference to other nations. It reinforces the Basque’s tie with his land and his compatriots, and nothing can supersede the power of this tie in terms of the beneficial influence it has on the strength and the upright integrity of his character. Even the highest of culture could not fully take its place as it cannot lend itself to all branches of society; love for the homeland and national ambition, however, are readily adopted by both, the beggars and the elites of a people, if in different shape. (2013, 110–111)

Moreover, Humboldt pointed out that the vivacity of the customs (and, therefore, the national character) was augmented by rivalries between the different towns and regions. He observed ‘a certain jealousy between all the neighboring towns’ which caused ‘stimulating competition’ regarding not only games, but also narratives, and the use of the Basque language. However, these rivalries always ‘dropped silent the instant

it came to matters of general interest' (2013, 55). Regarding costumes, therefore, Humboldt observed a lively unity in an interplay of diversity in the Basque Country.

### *Enlightenment*

Throughout *The Basques*, Humboldt praised the Basque nation for the diffusion of Enlightenment. Not only did he find enlightened individuals among the Basques, he also observed that they associated with the common people and thereby spread and supported intellectual progress. Therefore, the common people were able to develop their intellectual capacities:

Just how futile it is for the richer ones, who at first glance seem to live a life of mere idleness and redundancy, to associate with their fellow countrymen shows the widespread Enlightenment among the people. For instance, the inoculation of smallpox has become so common, especially in Markina, that even some residents in the mountains carry it out on their children as well. (2013, 66–67)

Unlike in France and Germany, among the Basques Humboldt did not observe any 'intellectual aristocracy'. And unlike in Spain, the Basque intellectuals he met identified deeply with their nation and were eager to transmit their knowledge to the commoners. This spread of enlightenment could only be possible because of the close contact between the educated individuals and the common people, which was guaranteed by the constitutions and made possible by the lively customs:

In Biscay, the current constitution has a most fortunate influence on the state of formation and ethics that in a most honorable way bears witness to the character of the people, the temperate and equitable disposition of the wealthy, and the diligence of the lower class. In the communion in which both live with each other on a continuous basis, it is always possible to introduce improvements, even if slowly and time after time, and such is truly the case indeed. (2013, 47)

Through this 'communion', 'parts of the newer Enlightenment and education flows into the people's vernacular and their terminology' (2013, 10). In other words, Humboldt saw that the Basques were able to integrate the Enlightenment into their nation. This was quite remarkable for him, and he compared the Basques to other small peoples in Europe, like the lower Britons in France, the Cornish in England or the Dalecarlians in Sweden:

[C]ompared to the Basques, not one of these nations has managed to acquire an independent political constitution and flourishing wealth, not one of them has succeeded more than the Basques in transplanting many of the Enlightenment's most beneficial fruitions right into their wildest of lands; all without forfeiting their uniqueness and original simplicity. (2013, 6)

For Humboldt, it was only the Basques who had retained a strong (and, therefore, free) national character and who were able to integrate the intellectual insights of the Enlightenment in such a way that these insights did not 'rob' of the bodily-sensual powers.<sup>4</sup>

### *Impact on theory*

Summing up, Humboldt was extremely impressed by the strong national character of the Basques, who, in his opinion, had developed all their powers in such a way that they formed a 'complete and consistent whole'. Such a national character he had not found

in Germany nor in France or in Spain. Therefore, it is comprehensible that his ethnographic studies of the Basques opened up insights regarding his above outlined anthropological questions.

In the introduction to *The Basques*, Humboldt laid out theoretical considerations that demonstrate that he indeed learned some lessons in anthropological terms in the Basque Country. Most of all, he praised the Basques' 'communion' regarding social practices; due to this communion it was possible that the Basques retained their strong national character (2013, 9) while at the same time developing their intellectual capacities. Among the Basques, he did find no 'unfathomable gap between a nation's people and its educated classes' (2013, 9–10).

Comparing this finding in *The Basques* with his early writings, theoretical movement becomes visible. In the Basque Country, Humboldt realized that a 'gap' between the educated classes and the common people was unfavorable not only for the commoners, but also for the intellectuals. Otherwise, he concluded, 'one waits in vain for truth, power, and demeanor even amid the finest cultural spheres of a nation' (2013, 9). This means that not only the common people were in need of freedom of thought; also, the 'educated classes' were in need of freedom of the sensual powers. Otherwise, intellectual efforts would result in bloodless rationalism. Therefore, Humboldt modified the rather individualistic perspective of his early writings by stressing the importance of 'continuous and reciprocal contact' (2013, 9) between the different classes of a nation:

After all, man is born to be formed as a social being; an individual must always become part of a mass of people, and all that is human converges in the simplicity of nature and in the full bloom of education at the same time. (2013, 9)

In his early writings, Humboldt had constantly stressed the freedom of the individual. In *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, he also spoke about the 'mass of people', but he placed the mass in opposition to the individual and held that the individual must free himself from the 'masses':

[T]he possibility of any higher degree of freedom presupposes a proportionate advancement in civilization,—a decreasing necessity of acting in large, compacted masses,—a richer variety of resources in the individual agents. (1854, 4)

Before Humboldt had studied the Basques, he was – like, for example, his friend Schiller – sceptical about too much popular sovereignty; he worried that the people could turn into a mob too easily because of its unsteady character, so that democracy would degenerate into a tyranny of the masses (Beiser 1992, 84–137). However, among the Basques, Humboldt observed that a 'decisive, steady, and robust character of the people' (XIII, 12) was in fact possible. In turn, he celebrated the 'pure and utter democracy' (2013, 40) of the Basques.

In conclusion, Humboldt's view of the freedom of the individual changed as a result of his ethnographic research. To be sure, he did not abandon his focus on the development of individuals; however, in his ethnography of the Basques, he realized that such development would never flourish if the individual emancipated – and, therefore, detached – itself from its community. By doing ethnography, then, Humboldt turned his liberal anthropological thoughts towards a communitarian perspective (cp. Vick 2007, 666–673).

Wilhelm von Humboldt's findings had a lasting effect on his political thinking. As I have shown, he still followed the communitarian approach that he had developed in his Basque





Statue of Wilhelm von Humboldt in Gernika (Spain).

studies in his famous policy drafts for reforming the Prussian educational system in 1809/10 (Mattig 2019, 298–318). And Vick points out that when Humboldt wrote several contributions for a new constitution for the German states between 1813 and 1819, he ‘paid heed to the kind of national self-assertion and feelings of self-worth seen in the Basque case, where such strength reciprocally guaranteed not just external autonomy but also internal liberty, energy, and strength of character’ (Vick 2007, 675).

Yet, the ethnographic studies had another impact on Humboldt’s thinking which led him to go beyond political anthropology in the long term: It has often been pointed out that Humboldt’s research interest turned from encompassing anthropology to the study of languages through his encounter with the Basques (e.g. Bunzl 1996, 29–31; Trabant 2012; Zabaleta-Gorrotxategi 2013). However, Humboldt’s long ethnographic path to this turning point has not yet been considered. I argue that among the Basques Humboldt realized that national characters cannot clearly be identified in regard to customs, gestures, or physiognomy (as he had assumed in his *Plan for a Comparative Anthropology* in 1795). In *The Basques*, he wrote: ‘The identity of a tribe can never be proven with certitude beyond the identity of its language’ (2013, 151–152; for more detail, see Mattig 2019, 256–263). Consequently, after his encounter with the Basques, Humboldt no longer conducted ethnographic fieldwork himself, but began to collect data about different languages (these data were, however, gathered by others). Theoretically, even in the linguistic studies of his late years, he still followed his initial idea about the human ‘powers’, conceptualizing language as a human trait in which the spiritual powers (thinking) and the bodily powers (speaking; listening) amalgamate (see especially Humboldt 1999, 46–80).

All in all, it turns out that it was the anthropological quest for liberty that led Humboldt into ethnographic fieldwork and, from there, into ethnographically informed politics for one thing and into the anthropological study of languages for another.

## Outlook

When Wilhelm von Humboldt died in 1835, he left behind an unfinished work in several regards. Many of his texts were not yet published; many even were in the state of fragment. This characteristic of being unfinished is also true for Humboldt’s entire intellectual

and political work: He had such high aspirations, that they could hardly be met. And it seems that even today, in a rather different historical situation, we are still struggling with the anthropological problems he has highlighted.

Since Humboldt's times, the 'free world' has certainly grown. However, particularly during recent years, it faces severe threats from within. Modern liberal democracies and multilateral political institutions suffer from conservative backlashes, which manifest, for example, in growing nationalism and unilateralism, in attacks on democratic constitutions, in racism, sexism, and hate speech. Many commentators report a growing social divide between a 'global intellectual elite' and the 'common people' who feel increasingly left behind. This divide is certainly reminiscent of Humboldt's observations and his fear that an 'unfathomable gap between a nation's people and its educated classes' is a major threat to liberty. To be sure, in today's situation, the liberal struggle focuses much more on establishing a 'world society' than in Humboldt's times. Yet, it seems that we still lack the 'wisdom' to unite the different human powers in a true humanist way. In fact, in *The Basques*, Humboldt worried that without such wisdom, 'national feeling' could degenerate into 'hatred' (2013, 54). Therefore, Humboldt's reflections on how to create a balanced relationship between body and mind, individual and community, customs and constitutions, local culture and global standards seem anything but outdated.

Interestingly, some of Humboldt's suggestions are echoed in anthropological and sociological studies dealing with current challenges to liberalism. Clancy (2016, 144), for example, writes that

In the modern era, one could argue that the mainstream of Western civilization has failed to take cognizance of—and give proper credence to—both the body and community in an understanding of human existence. Insofar as liberalism fails to properly balance the body with the mind, and community with individuality, people swing too far in the other direction.

Therefore, Clancy suggests that a liberal political anthropology should abandon the idea of an 'inclusive universalism' (as opposed to 'exclusive particularism') and instead focus on supporting 'inclusive particularism'. Similarly, Dill (2013, 5) states that

In its efforts to give individuals maximal freedom to pursue their own interests, liberalism can weaken many forms of belonging that provide the resources for cultivating commitment and common interests beyond the self.

Dill suggests that 'the particularities and traditions that often are minimized or made inconsequential within liberalism because of their threat to peace and tolerance may in fact lead to moral commitments beyond the self' (2013, 6).

Obviously, both Clancy and Dill identify 'liberalism' with rationalism, universalism, and individualism and thereby refer to the rationalist rather than the humanist tradition of liberal thought. Clancy himself posits that historically, liberalism has abandoned anthropological considerations (2016, 131–133). It would seem to me that the rationalist version of liberalism has long dominated over the humanist one, so that the latter has somewhat fallen into oblivion over time. Therefore, engagement with Humboldt's thoughts cannot only remind us that anthropology and liberalism are inextricably bound to each other in a historical perspective; it can also provide us with inspiration in our times. The new perspective on the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt presented in this article even suggests that liberal political theory and politics might do well to refer to ethnographic research.

## Notes

1. Regarding the relationship between Humboldt's and Mill's liberalism, see, for example, Valls 1999.
2. Regarding Humboldt's biography, see, for example, Sweet 1978/1980; Maurer 2016.
3. Wilhelm von Humboldt's seventeen volumes of the *Gesammelte Schriften* are referred to by indicating the volume number.
4. However, Humboldt was not very optimistic about the future of the Basque nation: "Basque will possibly have vanished from the list of living languages in less than a century" (2013, 8).

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