

The following text was originally published in *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education* (Paris, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education), vol. XXIII, no. 3/4, 1993, p. 613–23.

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WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT

(1767-1835)

With his brother, Alexander, who was two years younger, Wilhelm von Humboldt belonged to a generation which witnessed the collapse of absolute monarchies in the wake of the French Revolution and helped to shape the construction of a new Europe. The two brothers were both educated in the spirit of Rousseau and of the philanthropic school; in their youth, they adopted the ideas of the enlightenment, lived through the Sturm und drang (Storm and stress) period and went on to join the Weimar circle of poets where they enjoyed the friendship of Schiller and Goethe. While Alexander travelled the world and guided natural science into new paths, Wilhelm paved the way for the development of the modern moral sciences.

Wilhelm von Humboldt joined the circle of reformers who took the destiny of the Prussian State into their own hands after the Napoleonic occupation. The administrative reform is associated with the names of Stein and Hardenberg and the reform of the armed forces with those of Scharnhorst and Gneisenau. Wilhelm von Humboldt's appointed task was to lay the foundations of a new education system in Prussia. Although he only served for sixteen months at the head of the Prussian educational administration, his actions gave a fresh impetus to educational policy whose effects have been felt right down to the present day; his ideas on a modern educational theory have been attracting increasing attention of late.

Educational influences

Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt were the sons of the Prussian gentleman-in-waiting, Alexander Georg von Humboldt, by his second marriage. Their father had served at the court of Friedrich II in Potsdam and his second marriage was with the widowed Baroness von Holwede, whose son by a first marriage had been tutored by Johann Heinrich Campe. Campe, who was later to become a representative of the German philanthropic school, was now appointed tutor to the two brothers, first in Potsdam and, after their father had resigned from his official duties, in Tegel near Berlin.

In a letter to Mrs Campe, Wilhelm von Humboldt later wrote (on 12 September 1801) that he owed a debt of gratitude to Campe for much of his own education (*Letters*, p. 403). He was not referring solely to his Tegel years, but also to the journey made by Campe, accompanied by his former pupil, to Paris immediately after the storming of the Bastille.

The fact that the brothers must have enjoyed a very liberal education emerges from the judgement that the private tutors who took over from Campe are reported to have voiced: they expressed the view that something might perhaps still be made of 12-year-old Wilhelm, but that Alexander was a lost cause. Mistaken verdicts by educators are not uncommon, but a conclusion that was so manifestly wrong as the opinion on Alexander, who later became Grand Master of the Society of Natural Scientists, does seem curiously wide of the mark.

The fact that the two brothers were very different emerges from a letter written by a lady friend of their mother after a visit in 1785: ‘As to your sons, I can only say that Wilhelm is anything but a pedant, despite his erudition. On the contrary, he always has *le mot pour rire* [...] Alexander on the other hand is a shrewd little fellow—*un petit esprit malin*. What is more, he is extraordinarily talented [...]’ (*Letters*, p. 33/34). Wilhelm himself explained their differences in a letter written to his wife on 9 October 1804: ‘Since our childhood, we have moved poles apart although we have always remained fond of each other [...] From an early age, his inclination has been to the outside world, while I preferred the inner life, even when I was very young’ (*Letters*, p. 531).

Wilhelm von Humboldt must surely have had Campe’s personality in mind when he described the qualities of a good tutor in the letter to Campe’s wife referred to earlier, written in 1801 at the time when he was on the lookout for a teacher for his own children: the tutor must be a man ‘who takes pleasure in contacts with young children and has the necessary skills, who not only manages to find the right teaching methods but at the same time makes sure to take them out walking, to organize and familiarize the children with concepts that are right and appropriate’. He need not be an ‘accomplished scholar’, but he must have ‘a thorough knowledge of all that he teaches and insist on the same thoroughness in his pupils’. The remark which followed implies criticism of the philanthropic method of education: ‘Without this desire for thoroughness, everything remains a game and nothing good can come of it in theoretical or practical life’ (*Letters*, p. 422). This already makes it abundantly clear that Humboldt’s idea of general education has nothing in common with a mere superficial knowledge of a great many subjects.

The premature death of their father in 1779—he was described as ‘a man of understanding and good taste’, a ‘great friend to other men, sociable and a benefactor’—proved a traumatic experience for the boys; Wilhelm in particular found it particularly hard to come to terms with his loss. Responsibility for the further intellectual development of the brothers now lay with Christian Kunth who was employed as a house tutor to the Humboldts between 1777 and 1778, and remained a friend to the family afterwards when he was appointed to a civil service position in Berlin. (Wilhelm von Humboldt granted his wish to be buried in the grounds of Tegel Castle in 1829.) He also proved to be an outstanding educational organizer and knew how to impart a constant desire for learning in his pupils. Prominent representatives of Berlin intellectual life were also called upon to give tuition in some subjects. The scholars who were invited to give lectures in Tegel included Johann Jakob Engel, a teacher at the Joachimsthal Grammar School and who enjoyed a high reputation at the time as a philosophical author (*Der philosoph für die Welt*, 2 vols., Leipzig 1775–77). ‘Engel gave me my first education of real quality. He has a very astute and lucid mind; he may not be particularly profound, but he has a quicker grasp of facts and a better ability to put them across than I have encountered in anyone else [...]’, he wrote from Berlin on 12 November 1790 to Karoline who was later to become his wife (*Letters*, p. 143).

From an early age, the brothers took part in the cultural life of the nearby Prussian metropolis; they attended the Berlin salons in which the spirit of enlightenment prevailed. The Tugendbund or Virtuous Circle, used to meet in the house of the Jewish doctor, Dr. Herz; the focal point of the circle was his wife, Henriette, whom Wilhelm referred to by the endearing diminutive of ‘Jettchen’ in many of his letters. She did much to shape Wilhelm von Humboldt’s emancipatory view of women which was apparent in his later work. His unprejudiced attitude to Jewish members of society was also influenced by these ties with the Herz family.

In the family tradition, the brothers were destined for a civil service career. Wilhelm was expected to study law and Alexander the art of finance, known at the time as ‘cameralistics’. Kunth accompanied the brothers to the University of Brandenburg in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder in the autumn of

1787. However, this university was already in a state of decline and was soon to be wound up after the foundation of the University of Berlin. (A new university is being built today in Frankfurt-an-der-Oder and is intended to resume the old tradition as a centre for European education.) The Humboldts only stayed in Frankfurt for one semester; they moved to Göttingen University that was locked in a struggle for preeminence with the *alma mater* in Halle in this era of neo-humanist renewal of university education. Immediately after his arrival in May 1788, Alexander called Göttingen ‘Our German Athens! My brother is quite at home here because he has found ample nourishment for his mind [...]’ (*Letters*, p. 46). In his *Bruchstück einer selbsbiographie* (Fragment of an autobiography, 1816), Wilhelm von Humboldt stated his intention to ‘study on my own and in the greatest detail and depth everything that can broaden my view of the world and of man’ (*GS*, XV, p. 452 ff.).

The French revolution

In the course of the journey mentioned earlier, Johann Heinrich Campe and his young friend reached Paris in July 1789. The news of the storming of the Bastille had reached them in Aachen. This journey, which had been planned as an educational visit, turned into a personal experience of world-shaking events. Humboldt did not share the unbridled enthusiasm of his tutor, but he was well aware of the historical importance of this revolution. In a letter dated 17 August, he complained that he was ‘rather tired of Paris and France’, but said that ‘the political situation [is] now vitally important and had created a state of ferment among the people and in men’s minds’ (*Letters*, p. 93).

Just how durable the ideas of the French Revolution were to prove is apparent from a letter written years later to his wife Karoline (20 August 1814) in which he expressed his conviction that ‘all the dynamism, all the life, all the vigour and freshness of the nation [...] can only reside in the people’ (*Letters*, p. 734). A letter written to a friend in August 1791—known under the title of ‘Ideas on the Organization of the State Brought about by the New French Constitution’—later reflected the experience and changed political views acquired in Paris: ‘The nobility joined forces with the Regent in an endeavour to repress the people; that was the beginning of the end for the nobility [...]’ (*GS*, I, p. 82). ‘Mankind had suffered from an extreme and was obliged to seek salvation in another extreme.’ Admittedly, Humboldt doubted whether the new constitution would last, but he did believe that it would ‘throw a new light on ideas, help to foster every active virtue again and so spread its blessings far beyond the frontiers of France’ (*GS*, I, p. 84).

On the limits of state action

In January 1789, Wilhelm von Humboldt joined the Prussian civil service as a law clerk to the Supreme Court of Berlin, but left this post after only a year. His impending marriage to Karoline von Dacheröden, the daughter of the President of the Prussian Council in Erfurt, was certainly not the only motive for his departure; in fact, the reason lay much deeper and can be traced to Humboldt’s sceptical view of the exercise of State power in general and not merely of rule by an absolute monarch. Since 1790 he had been working on a publication entitled ‘Ideas for an endeavour to define the limits of state action’ which was completed in 1792, but not published in full until long after his death. The section dealing with education was already published in the December 1792 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* under the title ‘On public state education’. Humboldt thus took part in the discussion on the shaping of national education which was in progress in Germany, as elsewhere after the French Revolution.

In this publication, tight limits are placed on the State; its action should be confined to protection of the citizen within its frontiers and against attacks from outside. Humboldt advocated the greatest possible freedom for the individual in an environment in which 'each individual, depending on his own needs and inclinations and bounded only by the limits of his own energy' must be allowed to develop according to his own innate personality (*GS*, I, p. 111). He was afraid that State influence on education would 'always favour one particular form'; this was particularly deleterious if it 'relates to man as a moral being [...] and ceases altogether to have any beneficial action if the individual is sacrificed to the citizen' (*GS*, I, p. 143). 'Without regard to certain civic forms which must be imparted to men, the sole purpose of education must be to shape man himself' (*GS*, I, p. 145). Humboldt reversed the role of the State: 'Education of the individual must everywhere be as free as possible, taking the least possible account of civic circumstances. Man educated in that way must then join the State and, as it were, test the Constitution of the State against his individuality' (*GS*, I, p. 144). In Humboldt's view, man is not the object of the State but must be a subject who himself helps to shape conditions within society.

Humboldt subscribed to the educational policy notions of Count Mirabeau in calling for public education to 'take place entirely outside the limits [...] within which the State must confine its own activities' (*GS*, I, p. 146). He made repeated reference to Mirabeau's 'Discourse on National Education' and quoted him in a footnote: 'Education will be good to the extent that it suffers no outside intervention; it will be all the more effective, the greater the latitude left to the diligence of the teachers and the emulation of their pupils' (*GS*, I, p. 146). Elsewhere in this treatise on constitutional theory, Humboldt expressed his views on the duties of parents and on their responsibility 'to raise children [...] to complete maturity' (*GS*, I, p. 225). He even called upon the State to 'safeguard the rights of children *against* their parents' so that 'parental authority does not exceed normal bounds' (*GS*, I, p. 226). This emphasis on the rights of the child reveals the influence of Rousseau and the expressly formulated goal of the harmonious general education of each individual. The 'true purpose of man' can only be 'the highest and best proportioned development of his abilities into a harmonious entity' To attain that goal, human development requires freedom but also a confrontation with 'manifold situations' since 'however free and independent a man may be, he will develop less satisfactorily if his only experience is of monotonous situations' (*GS*, I, p. 106).

Humboldt adhered to this educational goal in his own lifetime, but his views on the influence of the State on education underwent a fundamental change during the period in which he headed the Prussian educational administration.

After his resignation from the civil service, Wilhelm von Humboldt resided mostly on estates in Thuringia which belonged to his parents-in-law and also in Erfurt or Jena. Both the Humboldts established close contacts with the Weimar circle of poets. Wilhelm became a particular friend of Friedrich von Schiller. This friendship found its literary reflection in an active correspondence.

After the death of their mother in 1796, Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt were left with substantial properties that provided them with the resources to undertake extensive travel for educational research. Many scientific works were the outcome of these journeys. Alexander was always bent on acquiring a better knowledge of the world, while Wilhelm sought a deeper understanding of man and his inner nature.

In the last decade of the eighteenth century Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote several of his most important publications. He made 'the search for the laws governing the development of human energies on earth' (*GS*, I, p. 93) the focal point of his scientific endeavours. He constantly enquired into the purpose of human life and asked which type of education was necessary to attain that purpose. In his study of classical antiquity, he debated the 'indispensable need for knowledge' in classical antiquity

because ‘it is a precondition for focussing individual endeavour on a more general purpose, namely the unity of the most noble purpose which is to shape man within the finest possible proportions’ (GS, I, p. 261).

The educational administrator

In 1802, Wilhelm von Humboldt rejoined the Prussian civil service and became envoy to the Vatican in Rome. This appointment enabled him to become even more familiar with the history and culture of classical Greece and Rome. But when ‘Germany suffered its deep humiliation’—in the words of a contemporary publication—after the battle at Jena-Auerstadt, Humboldt obeyed a call from Baron von und zum Stein to return to Berlin and play a leading role in the regeneration of the Prussian State. In 1807, Stein had issued an edict that abolished hereditary subjection, put an end to villeinage and was intended to terminate the whole caste system within society. A regulation permitting self-administration of the towns followed in November 1808. But the reformers often proved unsuccessful, not simply because of resistance from conservative elements but also because of the inadequate level of education of the citizens. The men around Stein saw Wilhelm von Humboldt as a figure who was capable of bringing about a complete reform of the Prussian education system. ‘Their idea was to strengthen and elevate the nation by removing the burdens weighing on it and also through education. They endorsed a proposal made by the great Swiss thinker and, after regaining their freedom, took action by setting up teacher training establishments [...]’ (Diesterweg, 1979, p. 41).

Two colleagues in the Prussian educational administration had already worked on a reform of the education system based on Pestalozzi’s ideas in 1808: Johann Heinrich Ludwig Nicolovius and Johann Wilhelm Süvern. They granted scholarships to young teachers and sent them to study Pestalozzi’s methods in Yverdon. In a letter, Süvern urged these ‘Prussian pupils’ not just to acquire the mechanical forms of the method but to penetrate to its ‘innermost heart’ and to ‘warm themselves at the sacred fire’ which was spread by Pestalozzi (see Diesterweg, 1961, p. 155). Following their return, the intention was that they should help to disseminate Pestalozzi’s pedagogical ideas as the heads of teacher training seminaries or members of their teaching staff. To begin with, Humboldt felt some reservations over Pestalozzi’s teaching methods, but these were probably dispersed under the influence of Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s ‘Addresses to the German Nation’. In two of these addresses, Fichte had taken Pestalozzi’s ideas as the foundation of his plan for German national education. Even before Humboldt met Nicolovius, he wrote to him on 25 March 1809 that ‘the introduction of Pestalozzi’s method has my undivided support [...] provided that it is put into effect correctly’ (*Letters*, p. 593). In Nicolovius and Süvern, Humboldt had particularly able colleagues who were bent on reform of the Prussian education system.

On 28 February 1809, Wilhelm von Humboldt became head of the culture and education section at the Ministry of the Interior, but Stein had left office by then. Napoleon had called for his dismissal and the King of Prussia had acceded to that request. This section was answerable to the Minister of the Interior, Count von Dohna, with whom Humboldt did not enjoy particularly good relations. To underline the importance of the education system for the Prussian reform programme, Humboldt advocated from the outset its separation from the Ministry of the Interior; he urged both the Minister of the Interior and also the King to set up a Ministry of Education in its own right. But this only came about many years later under Altenstein in 1817.

Humboldt’s view on the way in which government business should be transacted differed greatly from those of von Dohna and Finance Minister von Bülow. Humboldt wanted to see more collegiality, but was unable to persuade either the Minister or the King of the need for a State Council.

As head of his own section, he adopted a distinctly collegial style of management. In a letter to the famous neo-humanist, Christian Friedrich Wolf, whom he called to Berlin and wanted to join his own department, he wrote on 31 July 1809 that 'the joint reflection by several heads' had his preference, as did 'a collective opinion rather than that of an individual, even my own' (*Letters*, p. 610). He was the instigator of a Scientific Delegation that was to bring the spirit of science to administrative functions. But in 1815 the responsibilities of this scientific council, whose membership included leading scholars, among them Schleiermacher, were confined to the organization of examinations.

The exchange of correspondence between Wilhelm von Humboldt and his wife, who had stayed behind in Rome where she was expecting her ninth child, enables us to reconstruct with some accuracy the ideas and thoughts that motivated him during his civil service career. Just a few days after taking up his duties in Berlin, he informed his wife on 4 March 1809 of his plan to arrange 'for schools to be paid for by the nation alone' (*Letters*, p. 591); he wanted a fund to be set up to enable schools to be run and their teachers paid independently of the government and external circumstances. He took that idea further in a letter to Nicolovius: 'Education is a matter for the nation and we are preparing (admittedly with great caution) to diminish the powers of the State and win the nation over to our own interests' (*Letters*, p. 594).

Humboldt never advocated a system of national education that was predominantly Prussian; he looked beyond the frontiers of the State of Prussia and saw himself as a spokesman of the whole German people; in his scientific works, his thinking always had in mind the interests of all mankind.

In early April 1809, Humboldt left Berlin to travel to the seat of government that had been transferred to Königsberg (now Kaliningrad). He devoted himself to his new duties with extraordinary zeal; he visited schools in Königsberg, often unannounced, and set out on an extended series of visits in September/October which took him to Gumbinnen and Memel and in the course of which he refined in still greater detail the school plan which he had drawn up in Königsberg.

Because the education process consists of 'three natural stages', Humboldt advocated three different types of schools, i.e. establishments for elementary schooling; for secondary schooling; and for university education.

The elementary school was to lay the foundations for the subsequent levels of education. If pupils were excluded from further courses of education from the outset, the elementary schools would become nothing other than 'people's schools in the most derogatory meaning of the term' (quoted by Spranger, 1910, p. 138). In his 'Guiding Ideas on a Plan for the Establishment of the Lithuanian Municipal School System' (1809), Humboldt explained that 'this whole education system therefore rests on one and the same foundation. The commonest jobbing worker and the finest graduate must at the outset be given the same mental training, unless human dignity is to be disregarded in the former and the latter allowed to fall victim to unworthy sentimentality and chimera' (*GS*, XIII, p. 278). Humboldt advocated 'complete training of the human personality' even for the poorest members of society in the elementary schools (*GS*, XIII, p. 266) and naturally also the possibility for pupils who lacked resources of their own to be able to attend higher educational establishments by drawing on a newly created national fund. This idea of a uniform educational structure with three successive stages did not gain acceptance in the nineteenth century and has not even been put completely in place in the twentieth.

The importance attached by Humboldt to a democratic school constitution emerges from a letter written to his wife from Vienna on 20 August 1814: elementary schooling must be organized in such a way 'that it becomes a general foundation which no one can disparage without disparaging himself; it must be the basis on which all subsequent education can be built' (*Letters*, p. 735). At that time he was again employed in the foreign service. Diesterweg reports that 'Wilhelm von Humboldt,

who was as imaginative as he was scholarly, found time during the Congress of Vienna to think his way into the ideas of Pestalozzi's popular education and showed the same energetic support for the creation of elementary schools as he had previously for the foundation of Berlin University' (Diesterweg, 1976, p. 75).

The Königsberg period had given Humboldt a deeper insight into Pestalozzi's ideas on teaching. Carl August Zeller, who taught after 1803 at Pestalozzi's establishments, first in Burgdorf and then in Yverdon, was summoned to Königsberg in 1809 and placed in charge of the orphanage and an affiliated teacher training seminary; the graduates of this seminary would, it was hoped, reform the East Prussian school system according to the principles of Pestalozzi. In October 1809, the royal family visited the orphanage headed by Zeller, and Humboldt presumably accompanied them.

The death of his father-in-law obliged Humboldt to interrupt his school reform activities. In November 1809 he took extended leave in order to settle the estate for his wife who was still living with their children in Rome. The desire to be reunited with his family and the realization that he would never be able to gain acceptance for his school plan or for his ideas of effective educational administration under the government of the day led to his resignation in the spring of 1810 that the King accepted on 25 May. This step was greatly regretted by the reformers, but his departure was a source of some satisfaction to his opponents, especially Minister von Dohna who was extremely dissatisfied with Humboldt's 'lack of religious understanding'. On 23 June 1810, Nicolovius took over his duties with one exception—Humboldt remained chairman of the founding committee of Berlin University.

How difficult he found it to leave the educational administration and rejoin the foreign service is apparent from a letter which he wrote to his wife on 28 July 1810: 'The internal administration of a country is beyond doubt far more important overall than its external relations; but the education of a nation over which I presided and which went ahead successfully under my administration is of incomparably greater importance still.' He went on to explain once again what his intentions were: 'I had drawn up a general plan which covered everything from the smallest school to the university and in which all the component parts fitted together; I was at home with all these parts. I took on the smallest and largest tasks without any preference and with the same energy. I was put off by no difficulties [...]' (*Letters*, p. 662 ff.).

The foundation of Berlin University

Plans to set up a university in Berlin had already existed since the beginning of the Prussian reform era (See Fichte's 'Deduced Plan for a Higher Educational Establishment to be Set Up in Berlin', 1807, and Schleiermacher's 'Occasional Thoughts on Universities in the German Sense, with an Annex Dealing with a New University Establishment', 1808), but we owe their implementation to Wilhelm von Humboldt. His university model is characterized by the unity of teaching and research. It was to be 'a special feature of the higher scientific establishments that they treated science as a problem which is never completely solved and therefore engaged in constant research' (*GS*, X, p. 251).

The university was also to be an establishment of general education, an *alma mater* that taught all the sciences and did not concentrate on occupational training. A visit to the Hohe Karlsschule in Stuttgart in 1789 on his return journey from Paris had already consolidated his distaste for an early vocational orientation of education. He had not yet met Schiller who had spent seven years of torment in that establishment when he wrote in his diary that this type of education seemed not only 'flawed, but altogether harmful' to him. He wondered: 'What bias must be the consequence of such regulated education forced on to pupils from tender childhood to mature youth?' (*Letters*, p. 98). After he took

over responsibility for the educational department, these impressions led him to decide on the closure of the Prussian cadet corps, another reason being the caste spirit that prevailed in it.

University education must in his view continue and complete the general education imparted in the previous school years. University education must, however, differ from teaching in elementary and secondary schools and have a special nature of its own. Without teachers there can be no elementary education but their role is not central in university training: 'The university teacher is therefore no longer a teacher and the student no longer someone merely engaged in the learning process but a person who undertakes his own research, while the professor directs his research and supports him in it' (*GS*, XIII, p. 261). Close contact with their teachers should enable students to undertake their own independent scientific work.

The freedom of science and autonomy of the teaching staff are the premisses on which Humboldt's university model is based. From our modern vantage point, it may be thought that this model tended to be too remote from politics, but Humboldt himself had reservations on this matter and did not want to allow science to be misused by politics. Neither should his idea that the university must grant 'solitude' to the scholar be interpreted as an attempt to lock science away in an ivory tower.

Heinrich Deiter, for many years Dean of the Pedagogical Faculty at the Humboldt University in Berlin, refutes the idea that Humboldt's university model is historically outmoded because of the tendency of universities nowadays to become establishments of mass academic training with a strong professional orientation. On the contrary, he points out that 'Humboldt's thinking may well be a starting point to facilitate a more profound analysis of the problems of the university' (Deiters, 1960, p. 39).

Humboldt organized the foundation of Berlin University; he found the necessary resources and a building, the former palace of Prince Heinrich, in which it is still housed today on Unter den Linden. He himself attended lectures by the newly appointed professors and in particular those of the first rector, Johann Gottlieb Fichte. On 10 February 1810, he wrote to Goethe: 'Here everything proceeds at a quiet pace which I am trying to the best of my ability to accelerate. The lectures by Wolf and Fichte are warmly applauded, and I attend both whenever I can [...]' (*Letters*, p. 638).

On either side of the entrance to the main building of Berlin University, which is now named after Wilhelm von Humboldt, monuments to the Humboldt brothers still stand today. Each in his own right, they represent the moral and natural sciences in nineteenth century Germany.

Wilhelm von Humboldt's educational policy concept failed to gain general acceptance, but then neither did the Prussian reforms associated with the names of Stein and Hardenberg, Scharnhorst and Gneisenau. Not even the reform of the grammar schools, which Humboldt saw as part of a uniform education system, was implemented. Philological courses were separated from theological training and a body of grammar school-teachers constituted, but the grammar school itself became an elitist educational establishment bearing the stamp of the Prussian State. At the lower educational level, Humboldt's colleague Süvern did continue his efforts to enact a law on education, but following many drafts the last attempt foundered in 1819 after the Karlsbad decisions.

A young Prussian diplomat, Varnhagen von Ense, who accompanied the Prussian Minister of State von Hardenberg to the Vienna Congress, gives us a telling personal character portrait of Humboldt: 'He is inspired by elevated ideas of world education, but their effective implementation is ruled out by the condition of our States and the world as it is today. Therefore, his qualities as a thinker are of little use to him as a statesman' (*Letters*, p. 740).

During his period as a representative of the Prussian government to the Congress of Vienna and later at the Aachen Congress, Wilhelm von Humboldt always had in mind the interest of the German people and was never content to pursue a strictly Prussian policy. In 1819, he was appointed

Minister of Estates in the Prussian government, but resigned again after only a few months because he wanted no part in the increasingly harsh persecution of 'demagogues' following the attack on Kotzebue. Humboldt described the Karlsbad decisions as 'shameful, unnational and unworthy of a thinking people' (quoted in Spranger, 1910, p. 38).

He went on to live mostly in Tegel near Berlin and busied himself with scientific work; only once, in 1829, did he play any further role in public affairs as Chairman of the Commission on the Foundation and Interior Design of the new Berlin Museum.

An educational theorist

Humboldt's school plans were not published until long after his death, together with his fragment of a treatise on the 'Theory of Human Education' which had been written in about 1793. Here Humboldt states that 'the ultimate task of our existence is to give the fullest possible content to the concept of humanity in our own person [...] through the impact of actions in our own lives'. This task 'can only be implemented through the links established between ourselves as individuals and the world around us' (*GS*, I, p. 283). Humboldt's concept of education does not lend itself solely to individualistic interpretation. It is true that he always recognized the importance of the organization of individual life and the 'development of a wealth of individual forms' (*GS*, III, p. 358), but he stressed the fact that 'self-education can only be continued [...] in the wider context of development of the world' (*GS*, VII, p. 33). In other words, the individual is not only entitled, but also obliged, to play his part in shaping the world around him.

Humboldt's educational ideal is entirely coloured by social considerations. He never believed that the 'human race could culminate in the attainment of a general perfection conceived in abstract terms'. In 1789, he already wrote in his diary that 'the education of the individual requires his incorporation into society and involves his links with society at large' (*GS*, XIV, p. 155).

In his essay on the 'Theory of Human Education', he answered the question as to the 'demands which must be made of a nation, of an age and of the human race'. 'Education, truth and virtue' must be disseminated to such an extent that the 'concept of mankind' takes on a great and dignified form in each individual (*GS*, I, p. 284). However, this shall be achieved personally by each individual who must 'absorb the great mass of material offered to him by the world around him and by his inner existence, using all the possibilities of his receptiveness; he must then reshape that material with all the energies of his own activity and appropriate it to himself so as to create an interaction between his own personality and nature in a most general, active and harmonious form' (*GS*, II, p. 117).

Close attention was not paid to the work of Humboldt from the angle of educational policy and educational theory until this century. In two books, Eduard Spranger was the first to 'recognize the true value of Humboldt's contribution to educational development at the transition from the nineteenth to twentieth century' (Benner, 1990, p. 5 ff.). In recent decades, the one-sided concentration on intellectual history has given way to an emancipatory interpretation of his pedagogical thinking in a series of works, most recently by Dietrich Benner who sees the possibility that 'the study of

Humboldt's work [...] will help to clarify the central problems and questions of recent educational theory as matters concerning all of us, and also help to resolve issues which require further theoretical and practical analysis' (Benner, 1990, p. 210).

Notes

1. Gerd Hohendorf (Germany) Professor emeritus at Dresden University. Member of the Commission on the History of Education and the School of the German Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. Co-editor of the publication *Geschichte de erziehung* [History of education], the complete works of Diesterweg, and of the works of W.Ratke, K.F.W. Wander and C. Zetkin. Author of monographs on reform and training policies for the workers' movement.

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