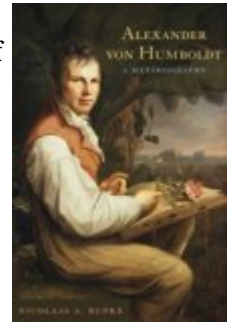


Nicolaas A. Rupke. *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. 316 pp. \$21.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-73149-0.



Reviewed by Reinhard Andress

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Commissioned by Alexander Freund (The University of Winnipeg)

Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was a naturalist, explorer, and writer who, together with his brother Wilhelm (1767-1835), figures among the great luminaries of German cultural and scientific history. His trips of exploration and discovery to Latin America (1799-1804) and through the Russian empire (1829) extended his reputation around the world. A romantic at heart, yet dedicated to the data collection of the Enlightenment, he viewed nature holistically through the interrelation of all physical sciences, the development of plant geography becoming one of his most enduring contributions to science. Running up to the year 2009, the 240th anniversary of his birth and the 150th of his death, new editions of his works appeared, for example, *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung* (2004) and *Zentral-Asien. Untersuchungen zu den Gebirgsketten und zur vergleichenden Klimatologie* (2009). A plethora of new biographical accounts and other studies was also published, for example, Werner Biermann's "Der Traum meines

ganzen Lebens." *Humboldts amerikanische Reise* (2008), Frank Holl's *Mein vielbewegtes Leben. Der Forscher über sich und seine Werke* (2009), Thomas Richter's *Alexander von Humboldt* (2009), Sandra Rebok's *Una Doble Mirada. Alexander von Humboldt y España en el Siglo XIX* (2009), Laura Dassow Walls's *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* (2009), Ottmar Ette's *Alexander von Humboldt und die Globalisierung* (2009), and Manfred Geiger's *Die Brüder Humboldt. Eine Biographie* (2009).

What distinguishes Nicolaas Rupke's *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography* (first published 2005 with Peter Lang) is the broad approach implied by its title. It is, in fact, the first metabiography of Humboldt. A study covering the writing about Humboldt through the ages might lead one to think solely in terms of reception theory. However, Rupke moves considerably beyond that by exploring not merely how Humboldt was read, but above all how "his life and *oeuvre* were aggressively recreated to suit contemporaneous needs" (p. 208). Each representation of Humboldt

is thus seen not only as the work of a particular biographer in his or her time, but also as embedded in a particular sociopolitical context. Rupke ultimately identifies the six different Humboldts he describes in the six main chapters of his study.

Before the unification of Germany under Bismarck, there was the liberal democrat, a subversive at the Prussian court who sided with the “Forty-Eighters” for freedom and national unity. With *Kosmos*, his grand view of all physical phenomena, Humboldt had not only become the face of German science but had popularized it as well. The subsequent Wilhelmian and Weimar periods made him strongly into a nationalist, a figure of all of German culture all Germans could be proud of in the unification attempts of the empire with its global reach, as a way to martial patriotism during World War I, and as a means of soul-searching after Germany’s defeat. It was an integrative function that not only related Humboldt as a pre-Darwinist to the English scientist, a means of emancipation of the lower and middle classes as a prerequisite to cultural progress, but also placed him and his brother Wilhelm into the context of German classicism (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller) as examples of a high national culture. A further Humboldt construct during this time saw in him a special envoy of sorts to Latin America where he enjoyed considerable popularity and where this popularity could be instrumentalized to support Germany’s economic interests and its settlement politics. The Nazis, in turn, made Humboldt, of pure Aryan descent, into a prime example of Aryan supremacy who through his travels in Latin America had influenced the political, social, and economic structures there as a only a German could. Rather than the enlightened rationalist, Humboldt the romantic idealist was emphasized, who had written *Kosmos* with “supranational breadth” (p. 91), interpreted by the Nazis as meaning German hegemony in Europe. Following the catastrophe of World War II, separate Humboldts developed in East and West Germany. The former flipped the image of

the Nazis around and now saw him from a Marxist perspective: “Humboldt had never been an Aryan supremacist but a supporter of the proletariat; not a *völkish* nationalist but a humanitarian internationalist; not a product of the German Movement from the Age of Goethe but of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution; not an idealist but a rationalist and even a dialectical materialist; and never an imperialist traveler planting seeds of German hegemony in Latin American soil but a liberator of native peoples from colonial oppression and from the inhumanity of slavery” (p. 116). Humboldt’s short career in the mining world among workers, his friendship with the revolutionary Georg Forster (1754-94), his meetings with the South American liberator Simón Bolívar (1783-1830), and his abolitionist stance were duly emphasized. West Germany’s biographical take on Humboldt made him into “the good German” as a means of “*rapprochement* between nations” (p. 141) following the racism, jingoism, and militarism of the Third Reich. With his unifying, cosmopolitan views, Humboldt became a way to make repairs to the severely damaged image of German culture in Europe and further abroad. Thus, his philosemitism was given considerable attention as a way to show that anti-Semitism was not irrevocably engrained in Germans. The fact that Humboldt had had close relations with the English-speaking world served the politics of West Germany’s integration into the West. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of Germany, the final Humboldt Rupke treats emerged. Humboldt-the-Marxist died, of course, and biographers spoke more of a globalized Humboldt who had understood the importance of scientific networking and had been an ecologist *avant la lettre*. In a chapter section on “Postmodernist Cracks,” Rupke shows how the critical approaches of Marxism, postmodernism, new historicism, and constructivism have begun to question the frequent mythical qualities of Humboldt hagiography. In addition, Humboldt gets outed.

In a final concluding chapter, Rupke makes the following point: “Our examination of the literature about Humboldt reveals a striking plasticity of the historical record—a plasticity indicated by the plurality of different and in some instances opposing representations of him, each expressing the interests of biographers from a particular setting of German political history” (p. 203). Or expressed more succinctly: “German politics determined the blueprint of Humboldt studies, individual scholars carried out the construction work” (p. 211). The study does indeed deliver in laying out the different Humboldt constructs horizontally through time, although one might ask if more vertical references might not also have been possible. For example, Humboldt-the-unifying-nationalist or Humboldt-the-good-German pops up in more than one historical period, albeit in varied forms. Given the different representations, we might pose the final question along with Rupke, “Will the real Humboldt please stand up?” (p. 211). The author’s answer is “all and none” (p. 211). Hence, his metabiographical approach ultimately dovetails with the postmodernist view that the writing of history is not objective but rather very much embedded in the ideology and politics of a particular generation. We will never be able to determine who the real Humboldt was. Nonetheless, the six Humboldts Rupke delineates in an impeccable English and in a text virtually free of any printing errors make for a fascinating read of his life as seen through particular sociopolitical appropriations. The some seventy-five pages of sources demonstrate how thorough his research has been. A chronology of Humboldt’s life, illustrations, a list of institutions and political parties referred to, and a helpful index round out this meticulous study. It can no doubt serve as a model for metabiographies of other scientific and cultural figures—or as the model for the next installment of the Humboldt metabiography. For the sociopolitical interpretations of such a multifaceted personality will surely not end.

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