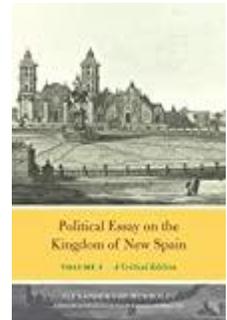
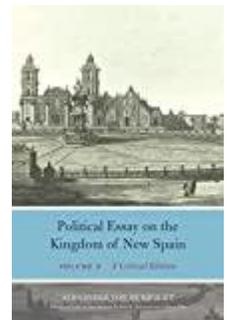


Alexander von Humboldt. *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain, Volume 1: A Critical Edition.* Edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 632 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-65138-5.



Alexander von Humboldt. *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain, Volume 2: A Critical Edition.* Edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 560 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-65155-2.



Reviewed by Roxanna E. Wylie (University of Arkansas - Fort Smith)

Published on H-Nationalism (January, 2022)

Commissioned by Evan C. Rothera (University of Arkansas - Fort Smith)

Alexander Von Humboldt's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* offered a comprehensive analysis of a modernizing New Spain with significant potential for growth and prosperity. *Political Essay* (1808) was originally published as a set of five books and part of his larger work *Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions to the New Continent* (1805-39). *Political Essay* covers Humboldt's 1803-4 voyage and is the definitive work on New Spain, now modern Mexico, issued shortly before Mexico's independence. Vera Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain: A Critical Edition*, a two-volume translation of Humboldt's *Political Essay*, corrects what

they label as the "inaccuracies, capricious alterations, and misrepresentations" in John Black's 1811 English-language edition. Kutzinski and Ette add a new edition translated from the 1825 second revised French edition (1: p. ix). Published seventeen years later, this second edition captures a shifting society bridging colonial concerns to a republican counterpart. Humboldt's progressive work addresses the monarchy, and later Mexican officials overseeing the new country, urging both to value a holistic approach to national wealth by promoting domestic improvements instead of colonial mercantilism.

Humboldt engages in a robust conversation with leading scientific authorities, pointing out flaws in current works and beliefs while policing his own work in later editions—correcting his own inaccuracies while critiquing those “more zealous than precise” (1: p. 31). He criticizes Adam Smith on several points regarding Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). Humboldt acknowledges Smith’s fame, but finds his estimates and conclusions doubtful. Humboldt considers Aaron Arrow-smith’s well-known *Chart of the West-Indies and Spanish Dominions in North-America* (1803) a work by “a highly regarded author, ... also the most incorrect of all” and potentially “dangerous to sailors” due to its inattention to details when naming locations (1: p. 41). According to the editors, Humboldt intentionally confronted “The Berlin Debate”—a Eurocentric approach to viewing all non-European countries as inferior—by “launching a bitter polemic against all those arm-chair philosophers who had never once set foot in the Americas” (1: p. xxiv). Humboldt promoted Mexican progress in the arts and sciences as evidence of an evolving civilization full of potential.

The Scientific Revolution heavily influenced Humboldt, whose research methods include citations detailing sources followed by a careful analysis leading to a conclusion. He obtained accurate readings and accounts by climbing volcanoes, trekking back roads, and digging through archives. Humboldt uses quantitative research to substantiate birth/death ratios, demographic ratios, and import/export tables. In chapter 10, on raw materials and commodities, Humboldt references his methods regarding the production and consumption of sugar: “I have meticulously indicated the sources from which I have taken the items ... without indications of the documents consulted, studies of this kind are of little value” (2: p. 12). Humboldt’s qualitative data includes native sources, ranging from oral histories to indigenous traditions. This data illuminates Mexican culture and preserve facets of indigenous daily life, such

as language and ethnic origins. His research relies heavily on published and unpublished reports from archives and official documents such as census and tithe records. He reluctantly uses the Count of Revillagigedo’s incomplete 1794 census to calculate population growth through 1803 but complains about bureaucracy’s inability to keep accurate records, a fact exacerbated by the unwillingness of citizens to cooperate when “fear of a tax increase” caused many to lie about household members (1: p. 203).

An overarching theme of Humboldt’s text is national wealth and prosperity. In his preface to the first edition, Humboldt explains that his goal is “to research which factors had the greatest influence on the advances of the population and the national industry” (1: p. 11). Humboldt starts his comprehensive essay with the coastal edges of New Spain in *A Reasoned Analysis of the Atlas of New Spain* (1811), added to the second edition of *Political Essay*. He then slowly works his way inward through borders, topography, population, demographics, climate, agriculture, mining, trade, and military defense—all influencers of national wealth. *Analysis* covers in detail the borders of New Spain, its internal navigability, and the accessibility of ports and argues persuasively that ease of navigation directly impacts commerce. His measurements, based on astronomical calculations, along with investigative research into both published and unpublished papers, firsthand accounts, travel diaries, and urban legends, all contributed to correcting what he terms “the deplorable state of the geography of New Spain” by “demonstrate[ing] that a few positions in Mexico have been determined with the utmost precision” in the “hope[s] that [his] own maps may be revised soon, substituting more precise work for [his] own” (1: p. 58). While *Reasoned Analysis* is daunting to those unaccustomed to geographical measurements or barometer readings, this text supports Humboldt’s argument that “the geological makeup of these areas is an object of study of equal importance to the statesman and to the nat-

uralist traveler” (1: p. 99). In sum, a nation cannot know its true potential resources if it does not have an accurate picture of coastlines or ports, nor can it prosper if it does not know the location of trade routes.

After analyzing New Spain’s borders and terrain, Humboldt turns his attention to population and demographics. He uses meticulous statistical analysis to plot a trajectory of population growth—breaking down demographics by gender, caste, ethnicity, and region—while exploring how climate, disease, and oppression impact these categories. He details how climate affects different races depending on region of origin. While he upbraids farmers for being lazy, he praises indigenous miners by confronting those “who were content to criticize the degeneration of our species in the Torrid Zone” (1: p. 228). Humboldt had prejudices common to the times—mainly his seeing indigenous farmers as lazy since their mode was more subsistence farming rather than tapping into land’s ability to produce cash crops. His frustration with the country’s inability to keep up with the supply and demand of a growing population, thus creating food insecurity for the largest and poorest sectors of society, is palpable. Humboldt’s tables and discourses on the obstacles to population growth may seem tedious to all but political economists or anthropologists, yet these pages contain hidden gems worth mining. From burgeoning theories about how climate affects human robustness to vaccinations against diseases to European frustration over indigenous subsistence farming versus commercial agricultural production are a few topics meriting further exploration. Some of his insights are quite relevant to modern society. For example, Humboldt waxes positive about smallpox inoculations being introduced to Mexican society, claiming it is “remarkable patriotism by halting the progress of the epidemic through inoculation” (1: p. 222). In the same vein, Humboldt observes that the same country that brought smallpox to the continent also brought

“the seeds of relief and consolation to human suffering” (1: p. 222).

According to Humboldt, oppression adversely affects national prosperity. He describes a population beaten down from years of oppression, heavy taxes, and corrupt officials—European and Mexican. Humboldt warns the Mexican government of a coming storm if the largest sector of the population is not “rescued from their present barbarous, abject, and miserable condition,” echoing fears of uprising that had previously ripped through Peru and Saint Domingue (1: p. 263). He explores the prejudices *peninsulares* held about Creoles: “the ignorance that European pride complacently pins on the Creoles is neither the effect of the climate nor due to a lack of moral energy. This ignorance, where it is still evident, is solely the effect of isolation and defects in the social institutions of the colonies” since Creole and indigenous families do not have access to the educational opportunities of their European counterparts (1: p. 279). Humboldt believes that “precise knowledge of these ratios is of great political interest to those in charge of safeguarding the peace of the colonies” (1: p. 273). In other words, national prosperity is directly tied to ethnic equity. Despite inequalities, Humboldt points to academic and scientific spheres where race and origin can be set aside and believes progress in these areas showcases Mexico’s advancement. While Humboldt’s language includes xenophobic elements, he is quick to praise the many Mexican scientists and their contributions to both national and scientific advancement—undergirding his enlightened ideals of equality in the sciences. Humboldt sums up his discourse on demographics by admonishing that “a wise government that took the best interests of humanity to heart would propagate enlightenment and education ... gradually making this monstrous inequality of rights and fortunes disappear,” yet he confirms that “these distant regions are considered tributaries of Europe” and “they are not governed in the manner that public interest requires” (1: pp. 296-297). Humboldt believes this will lead to an

“uneasiness and a rancor that disturb the enjoyment of social life” (1: p. 297).

Political Essay is an interdisciplinary work that will interest scholars in disciplines ranging from the social sciences to the biological sciences. Many of Humboldt’s scientific and social discussions fall within the scope of best practices for manufacturing and industry. Humboldt’s concern is to increase national prosperity while improve working conditions for indigenous workers and safeguard capitalism for private enterprise. He decries corrupt taxes and duties used to fill depleted royal coffers and line private pockets. Books 4 and 5 cover Mexico’s agriculture and mining, including raw materials produced for industry and commodities for domestic and foreign trade. Interestingly, Humboldt claims “the main sources of Mexico’s wealth are not the mines but, rather, agriculture that has noticeably improved since the end of the last century” (1: p. 507). This remark and subsequent chapters mark how climate trends in the torrid versus temperate zones affect both population and vegetation growth and track product consumption among indigenous versus Europeans. Volume 1 of *Critical Essay* ends poignantly with Humboldt’s critical observation about government policies that sabotage national interest. He sees Mexican agriculture as “chained to an administrative system that impoverishes the colonies without contributing to the wealth of the homeland” (1: p. 571). He advises, in the second volume, how to increase national prospects by reducing government interference with agriculture, lifting strangling duties and taxes, and breaking up control over raw materials needed for mining and industry, suggesting that these measures and internal improvements have the potential to improve trade and affluence for the marginalized. According to the editors, Humboldt attempts to dispel European fears about Mexico and South America’s mining capabilities. He addresses concerns about the effects of New Spain and South America entering the world market by reassuring that the influence of South American silver and gold “will be

quite slow and extremely subtle” (2: p. 286). Humboldt sums up New Spain’s economic affairs as barely solvent and in need of infrastructure reorganization.

Navigating Humboldt’s tables of production and crop yields is daunting. His writing is meandering at times, following rabbit trails and trains of thought that do not drive home main points. Many of his subpoints, such as tracing migration through linguistics and agriculture, do not further his immediate goals of writing a political essay and could have been left out with no immediate loss. His chapter summaries with fewer tables would have been adequate yet much would have been lost if Humboldt had curbed his curiosity. His writing includes commentary on world events and widely held theories. Lewis and Clark’s expedition of discovery, Jacques Necker’s financial statements, border issues between the United States and New Spain, and medical theories on climate all find a place in Humboldt’s writings. His writings are not for one people or one country but for everyone. While some language, such as the use of “savage” or “uncivilized” may offend twenty-first century sensibilities, Humboldt believed “that the well-being of whites is intimately linked to that of the copper race, and that there can be no lasting happiness in both Americas until this race, humiliated but not degraded by long oppression, can participate in all the advantages that come from the advancement of civilization and the improvement of social order” (2: p. 463).

A Critical Edition contextualizes Humboldt’s field work and extensive research through the introduction and annotations. That said, the digital annotations present some difficulties. Cost-effectiveness is understandable when printing two volumes yet using a website for supplementary resources may prove difficult for some readers. They must have access to these digital resources at the time of reading or download over four hundred pages of annotations onto a digital device for reference—not impossible, just inconvenient. These

annotations, however, provide invaluable insight into “the vast scientific network that Humboldt created” and the enlightened scientists, astronomers, and economists that influenced him, many heavily involved in the French Revolution (1: p. x).

Kutzinski and Ette’s *Critical Edition* offers English-speakers an opportunity to view a literary snapshot of New Spain through the lens of Humboldt’s *Political Essay*. Humboldt weaves the thread of enlightened idealism through these pages, tying national wealth to the health and industry of its people. In other words, citizens are

the real wealth and treasure of a country, not just its natural resources. Humboldt reiterates this revolutionary idea by addressing the ruling body throughout his work. He calls attention to important details that they should consider—broadening the focus of New Spain’s wealth to include agriculture—reminding authorities that equity and prosperity for all sectors are the true litmus tests of a nation’s wealth. Humboldt’s writing offers a snapshot of the shifting social currents during the Age of Revolutions as nations emerged from the rubble of empires.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism>

Citation: Roxanna E. Wylie. Review of Humboldt, Alexander von. *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain, Volume 1: A Critical Edition*. ; Humboldt, Alexander von. *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain, Volume 2: A Critical Edition*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. January, 2022.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55827>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.