

Wilhelm von Humboldt. “On the Historian’s Task,” (1821) reprinted in *History and Theory*, 6:1 (1967): 57-71.

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“The historian’s task is to present what actually happened.”

Whether attributed in its various permutations to German Romantic Johann Gottfried Herder, historian Leopold von Ranke, or to its true author in this instance—diplomat, minister, historian and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt (p.57)—this is old wisdom. This brief statement of the historian’s task has also been much contested, whether from the perspective that history should be about more than just the facts, or based on the contention that there are no objective ‘facts’ that an historian can actually present.¹ Nonetheless, Humboldt’s statement and its implications have had a distinctive bearing on diplomatic history and on the practice of history in general, and his ideas continue to have relevance despite nearly two centuries having passed since their original authorship.

Despite presenting a simpler model of the historian’s subject than the ideas engaged by presupposition theorists and the linguistic turn, Humboldt notes without reservation that the causes for discrete events and trends involve much more than what directly meets the eye, and that the complexities of language challenge the historian still more in the ideal task of recreating objective history. At the risk of inaccuracy, he encourages historians to be creative, to fill this void with historical imagination. To use Humboldt’s phrase, “It is the historian who is supposed to awaken and stimulate a sensibility for reality, and his activity is defined subjectively by the elaboration of that concept as it is defined objectively by the historical narrative.” (p.60)

Humboldt is at all times aware of the limitations of the historian’s evidence, and of the difficulties in reproducing enough of it so as to resurrect, in textual form, the events, trends, interactions and narratives that occurred on the stage of real life. The historian, he suggests, “has to compose the narrative of events in such a way that the reader’s emotions will be stirred by it as if by reality itself.” (p.60) Here, Humboldt departs from the wisdom of his colleague in the Prussian government, military reformer Gerhard Scharnhorst, to discover the lessons of history through a different lens. He does not directly seek specific lessons from specific instances, but rather, by recreating through the historian’s narrative a portion of past reality, “to enliven and refine our sense of acting on reality.” (p.61)

¹ See the discussion of sources for error in Mary Hawkesworth, *Feminist Inquiry* (Rutgers, 2006), chapter 1.

For Humboldt, the study and recreation of history is more art than science: to reconstruct events and their underlying motive forces most nearly resembles the brushstrokes in a painter's recreation of nature. History is both an intuitive and an empirical study, adding analysis of substance to appreciation of form. Again, his wisdom speaks more for itself than any modern summary can do: "It is only the premature and multifarious application of pure science that weakens us in the sensitivity to the beauty of [art's] form. Artistic imitation, therefore, has its origin in ideas, and truth of form appears to the artist only through these ideas. The same process must occur in historical imitation, because in both cases it is nature that has to be imitated." (p.63)

Humboldt prefigures a number of contemporary theories of history in his appreciation of subtexts to human action, and in his implicit understanding of the historian's bias. Thus, the historian's task is to abstract the various causes and trends that gave rise to an event or a particular narrative, as a matter of fact. However, as the historian's representation of events is merely that—a representation—and the form into which the historian crafts a narrative on the page inevitably carries the hallmark of his brush, just as "Las Meninas", for example, is distinctively the production of baroque painter Diego Velasquez.²

Prefiguring by more than a century the development of post-positivism, postmodernism, feminist and standpoint theories, Humboldt suggested that the mainsprings of historical actions and their consequences lay in "the psychological forces of multiple, intermeshing human abilities, emotions, inclinations, and passions," which he admitted were much more difficult to chart than the course of events themselves.(p.66) At the same time, he suggested that the individual constituted the most basic unit of history, whose "unique force... runs the gamut of all human emotions and passions[, and] imprints upon them its own stamp and character." (p.66) He also insisted upon human freedom as a paramount political ideal, such that "all world-historic progress of mankind is based on the degree of freedom and on the nature of its reciprocal effects." (p.68)³ This ideal prefigures some of the biases in modern histories written from the standpoint of oppressed peoples,⁴ yet it involves an appreciation of complexity in human interaction and historical processes that lies ahead of the cultural turn and which may already supersede the typical categories of post-positivist historical analysis (i.e. race, class, gender, age, etc.). Humboldt's notion of history, however, arose not only from the standpoint of an educated man and creative thinker, but also from that of a veteran minister and diplomat whose dispositions and biases could not have been more different from those that informed the postmodern turn.

Long before its development in the late 20th century, Humboldt already promoted something that looks like postmodern theory, though it may be an improvement upon even that. He suggested that, although some guiding forces of history could readily be observed, others, although they might manifest themselves in the course of events, could not be discerned directly within what he

² Diego Velasquez, "Las Meninas" (1656). See also the description in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Paris, 1966, reprinted New York, 1973 [1966]), pp.3-17.

³ See also Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Limits of State Action," (1792)

⁴ Hawkesworth, *Feminist Inquiry*, chapters 2-3, e.g. pp.56-64; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Paris, 1949, reprinted New York, 1993), trans. H.M. Parshley, Author's Introduction and passim.

called the “world of events.” (pp.67-68). To this he added the notion that grand ideas, perhaps in a more abstract realm, motivate human emotions, passions, ambitions and actions, and their consequences. As one might expect from the acknowledged father of modern linguistics, Humboldt also noted the influence of language, which acts “as a unique vehicle for the creation and communication of ideas.” (p.70)⁵ Thus we return to the historian’s exposition, combining the painstaking, nearly scientific collection and assessment of historical data, not only with an elevated and almost spiritual imagination to divine their causal roots, but also with a delicacy and subtlety of presentation which borders on high art. Here, in all its sophistication and subtlety, is Humboldt’s original formulation in elucidated form, which he appropriately summarizes thus: “In its final, yet simplest solution the historian’s task is the presentation of the struggle of an idea to realize itself in actuality.” (p.70) For it is not merely events and their connections, but also the ideas that motivate individual people to act and to interact, individually and in groups, that form what actually happened.

For generations, these ideas have been known to historians of diplomacy and embedded within their work. Indeed, no full appreciation of the diplomatic art is possible without reference to the universe of ideas and the full gamut of the human experience—passions, biases and all.⁶ Only in light of their appreciation of the complexities of the diplomatic art are historians of that craft truly able to compose proper diplomatic history. To re-read Humboldt’s thoughts, therefore, may not necessarily convey much that is new, but it reaffirms for the most part, and makes explicit, what most diplomatists already know.

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[Note- This essay was edited on 20 April 2007 to correct the spelling of the author’s name-GF].

⁵ He thus prefigures by nearly 150 years Foucault’s appreciation of semiology and hermeneutics, *The Order of Things*, pp.29-30.

⁶ Consider the advice offered in François Callières, *On the Art of Negotiating with Sovereigns* (1716), *passim*. See also the latest translation by Karl W. Schweizer and Maurice Keens-Soper (New York, 1983, reprinted 1994).