

de diferentes calibres, la teoría de redes aparece no solo como una alternativa bienvenida, sino también, como señala Rachel Midura, necesaria para ayudar a reintroducir esta gran mayoría ausente, escondida por tanto tiempo en la historia del conocimiento en la Edad Moderna. ■

**Julianna Morcelli-Oliveros**

ORCID: 0000-0003-0576-3827

**Alexander von Humboldt.** Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain. A Critical Edition. Edited with an introduction by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette. Translated by J. Ryan Poynter, Kenneth Berri, and Vera M. Kutzinski. With annotations by Giorleny Altamirano Rayo, Tobias Kraft, and Vera M. Kutzinski. 2 vols. Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press; 2019. 585 + 633 p. ISBN 978-0-226-65138-5. 65 €.

In 1808 Alexander von Humboldt began publishing a treatise on New Spain, Madrid's richest colonial territory centered around what is today Mexico, where he had spent almost twelve months in 1803. He wrote it in French, followed by German and English editions, and ultimately arrived at no less than six volumes with all together fourteen chapters. A full Spanish translation, which Humboldt partially revised himself, was provided by Vicente González Arnao in 1822.

This new English edition encompasses over 1000 densely printed pages of text and is part of the series «Alexander von Humboldt in English». The latter already includes the German naturalist's *Essay on Cuba* and his *Views of the Cordilleras*, which complement Humboldt's important *Essay on the Geography of Plants*, also by Chicago University Press. The translation is based on the second, revised French version of 1825-27 and surpasses all previous foreign-language renderings: it is linguistically elegant, does justice to Humboldt's terminology, and applies great precision in retaining the original tables. The editorial team around Vera Kutzinski, a distinguished literary scholar, has added a list of the literature used by Humboldt himself and posted it on the press's website, which also hosts annotations of more than 460 pages that focus on the naturalists, explorers, physicians, and alike whom Humboldt referenced in the main text. Readers are guided, too, to the digitalized, «geographical and physical» *Atlas of*

*New Spain* of 1811, in which Humboldt offered detailed maps and graphical representations of the territory.

This edition constitutes a milestone in the current process of rediscovering the indefatigable researcher from Prussia: it makes a largely forgotten opus accessible and allow us to re-examine Humboldt's analysis of society around 1800. At times in a repetitive and convoluted style, Humboldt described no other country in such depth and with such acumen. Not only did he tackle the difficulties in mapping New Spain and sketching its geography, but he also went to great length to explain demographic developments as well as social and ethnic differences. Humboldt looked at the features of the separate «intendancies» created in 1786 as part of the Bourbon reform and explored —with too much optimism, as we know today— the potential of the regional agriculture. Incessantly providing statistical data, he immersed himself into the prospects of the oligarchical mining sector, manufacturing and trade. Equally intriguing are his observations on infectious diseases, especially the *vómito prieto* —the Yellow Fever—, which he rightly understood as a medical as much as social challenge, his caution coupled with fascination about establishing a channel between the Pacific waters and the Caribbean Sea, and his warnings about excessive deforestation.

But what to make of Humboldt's approach two centuries later? The editors leave aside the relevant historiography (or any references to the secondary literature, for that matter, even in the annotations.) Instead, they depict Humboldt as a model we should embrace in today's global age. Their approach is not the same as Andrea Wulf's with her claims about Humboldt «inventing nature». Yet, heroic narratives take various shapes. The volume presents Humboldt as the «undisputed [!] father» of no less than «modern geography, early American studies, transatlantic cultural history, and environmental studies», and a man who made «signature contributions» to fields as diverse as political science and engineering (pp. xiv-xv). Accordingly, he «revolutionized» in his writings about the tropics «the ways in which Europeans thought and still think about the New World», was grounded in «steadfast democratic beliefs» and fueled by a «humanitarian fire» (pp. xv-xvi, xxv). That's a lot, especially for a man who was aware of his limitations, who knew how much he relied on others, understood that all knowledge is temporary, and cherished what he saw as the advantages of constitutional monarchies.

It all depends on the perspective, methodology, and whether we see in «Humboldt» primarily a text and an ideal type of thinking (in the Weberian sense of the word), or try to understand Humboldt's analytical potential and limita-

tions, ideas and repercussions, as the outcome of specific intellectual, political and social contexts. Ever since Hanno Beck, Juan Ortega y Medina, and Donald D. Brand, as well as Manfred Kossok, Michael Zeuske, Lutz Raphael, Jürgen Osterhammel, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Jeroen Dewulf, Ursula Klein, Miguel Ángel Puig-Samper, and Sandra Rebok, historians have shown that Humboldt was steeped in the traditions of the late Enlightenment and German-style Cameralism, depended on Jesuit and Creole knowledge, tapped into various sources of indigenous South-American as much as European knowledge, and underwent different phases of appreciation in South America and Spain.

This hybridity —to read this edition from a historical perspective— accounts for some of the most striking features of Humboldt's analysis of New Spain: it reflects the transition from the late mercantilism, well known to Humboldt from his years as a mining inspector in Prussia in the 1790s, to a more dynamic and global understanding of domestic and trans-continental economies. In fact, *New Spain* demonstrates that Humboldt moved toward the concept of «political economy», a key term that he often mentions in the text, as advanced by Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus. One would need to add that Humboldt concluded the second edition *after* the chain reaction that led to the collapse of Spain's empire and new South American nation-states. However, there are only very few moments when Humboldt mentioned these developments in his volumes, which retained the pre-independence imprint and only occasionally build in more recent data. Even the indirect references to the slave rebellion on Saint-Domingue, or what we call today the Haitian Revolution, which broke out prior to Humboldt's arrival in the Americas, remain sparse and cautious.

Moreover, I would suggest that Humboldt revealed in *New Spain* a fundamental epistemological dilemma that science was facing in the Age of Revolutions: the search for precision was accompanied by the acknowledgment that exactly this precision remained impossible, as Humboldt realized soon in his efforts to map Mexico. With astonishing candor, he revealed the discrepancy between one's «trust in numbers» (Theodore M. Porter), to which he himself contributed in his obsessive collection of data, and the confession that «mechanical objectivity» (Daston/Galison) was illusionary. That, too, makes this gargantuan study important and worth being read anew.

The materials presented in this edition will enable scholars to continue pursuing important questions pertaining to such discrepancies and, more generally, to the nexus between knowledge-making, social context and individual agency. This process will contribute to historicizing Humboldt, this extraordi-

narily versatile researcher and writer, as well as the societies he encountered and tried to understand. ■

**Andreas W. Daum**

State University of New York at Buffalo

ORCID: 0000-0003-3124-7439.

**Renée Wolcott, ed.** Art, science, invention. Conservation and the Peale-Sellers Family. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society Press; 2019, 174 p. ISBN 978-1-60618-081-5. 37 \$

Aunque con frecuencia desapercibido, el trabajo de las profesionales de la conservación y la restauración es necesario no solo para preservar el patrimonio cultural, sino también para facilitar que otros lo podamos consultar, estudiar y exponer. Se trata de un saber bañado con los tintes del arte y de la ciencia; y por ello a las autoras de este volumen les parece que su oficio tiene mucha relación con los Peale, aquella singular familia de artistas y coleccionistas que contribuyeron a forjar y popularizar la identidad cultural del nuevo país americano en torno al 1800. En efecto, este libro plantea un capítulo señalado de la historia de la ciencia mediante el acercamiento particular a los trabajos de conservación precisos para preparar los materiales de una doble exposición. Desde 2014, las autoras del libro, conservadoras del museo y de la biblioteca de la American Philosophical Society de Filadelfia, dirigieron los trabajos que dieron como resultado dos exposiciones entre los años 2017 y 2018: «Curious revolutionaries: the Peales of Philadelphia», en el museo, y «Conservation and the Peale-Sellers Family Collection», en la biblioteca. Ambas pueden ser vistas aún, parcialmente, en la *web* de la mencionada sociedad filosófica de Filadelfia.

El libro que reseñamos utiliza estas exposiciones para explicar cómo se elabora desde el área de conservación un proyecto de investigación dirigido a todos los públicos. En otras palabras, cómo acercarse al objetivo de crear un discurso expositivo teniendo en cuenta las dificultades que, en términos de conservación, entrañan los objetos de colecciones tan diversas como las de los Peale. Esta aproximación permite ver otras caras de una historia de la ciencia polifónica, pues abre la puerta a un conocimiento más extenso sobre las prácticas del coleccionismo: cómo se creó, desarrolló y «terminó» una colección; cómo