

SCIENCE, NATURE AND LANDSCAPE IN ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT

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Alexander von Humboldt is now considered by some as the first that understood the geographical landscape in the modern sense, that is to say, as subjective and objective, object of emotion and of analysis at the same time. He is also claimed as an avant-garde of the environmentalist thought. The work that here is presented it is the result of a reflection about what I consider a paradox: why the conceptions of a naturalist that lived and worked among the XVIII and XIX centuries -considered for some as the last wise of the Renaissance for their universal knowledge- may have in relevance today coinciding with current formulations in geography and ecology?. How is possible that their ideas about the nature and landscape had no immediate continuity in geography? In fact, when the landscape became geographical object for the German geographers of the *Landchaftsgeographie* (more than half a century after the death of Humboldt), it was it strictly as real physiognomy of the geographical space?

This work, however, doesn't enter to value that dominant current conception of the landscape, objective and subjective at the same time that is reflected partly in the European Convention of the Landscape. Neither it is to explain the reasons of the humboldtiana conception recovery. Previously to it, it seems necessary to know with more detail how Humboldt understood really the landscape. For that reason we will conform us here with trying to understand and to explain which it was in fact that conception and from where it proceeded, in what measure it was explicit and how it is formulated in their work. For it, we will have first that recognizing the cultural environment in which Humboldt worked, we will investigate about those philosophical conceptions that could have more influence in its ideas of the nature and the landscape, for finally to analyze those ideas in its work and to recognize its linking with the scientific, philosophical and artistic environment in which he lived.

Its scientific formation, clearly empiric, positive and materialistic, here interests us less. Have more importance the influences of humanist and philosophical ideas received so much in their first years as in their youth. Their tutor Gottlob Christian Kunth, rousseauniano, inculcated him the love to the nature and it introduced him in the readings of books of trips. From the nineties of the XVIII century maintained contacts with the circle of romantic ideal-

istic philosophers and with Schiller and Goethe. It is mainly in this influence of the German idealism where seems to be the key of their conception about the nature and the landscape. For that reason we will stop shortly to consider the positions about these matters that had these two big thinkers of the time whose influence in Humboldt is unquestionable: Schelling and Goethe. In both we recognize an idea holista and pantheist of the nature, a strong aesthetic feeling, and an use of the landscape -so much as work of art or contemplative representation – as means for the intuition of the Whole or of the Absolute.

The recognition of the conception humboldtiana of the nature and of the landscape has been carried out with some of their more descriptive and more conceptual works: *Aspects of the Nature*, *Cosmos*, *Views of the Mountain Ranges and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of America*, *Ideas for a Geography of the Plants* and *Of the Orinoco to the Amazons. Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*. The empiric and materialist considerations of the nature are accompanied of other more idealistic conceptions, as a holista focus markedly idealistic, and the constants references to the harmony among the components of the nature and of the man with her, and to the influence that this had on the intelligence and morality of the communities. As for the landscape, prevails, without any doubt, the aesthetic perspective, even their use like access to the understanding of the Whole.

That is, his travels and his long stay in Paris, not away from the influence of German romantic idealist philosophy, which was dominant during the late eighteenth to mid nineteenth century and was represented by great thinkers such as Fichte, Novalis, Schelling, the Schegel brothers, Hölderlin, Hegel, Herder, Goethe and Schiller. A rather exceptional situation because in other parts of Europe such as France or England, empiricist conceptions prevalent at that time. Joined to the spell of nature, then captivated to philosophers, artists and scientists throughout the West, the German romantic idealism developed a philosophy of nature that, in certain thinkers, acquired a great relevance. Humboldt seems more influenced of it we might think in terms of their empirical and rational scientific career, their materialist conception that even makes explicit sometimes. Probably no scientist, philosopher, artist German could escape its influence in those days. It was a philosophy that seems to react against the materialistic positivism, which involved the separation of science and art, but also of nature and man. A split involving the removal of man's rational knowledge of nature, reserved for an increasingly complex science based on abstract models. A division which -as pointed out by Manuel Sacristan- corresponds with the peculiar division technical of the work in a given system of production and another of appropriation, that is to say, a typical differentiation of the capitalist system. Under these conditions of separation, science pushed to technological development as one of the great engines of progress of bourgeois society, subordinating fully to nature without considering their possible deterioration or the depletion of nonrenewable resources.

Humboldt participated in that scientific career, but maintaining at the same time, a holistic discourse about the nature, a integrative perspective, harmonious and pantheistic, similar to that held by Goethe and the German idealist romantic philosophers. Despite the obvious contradiction speech is not unduly stressed; seems to move in two separate fields: the analytical-materialist, for which he advance in knowledge of the laws of nature and the concatenation of phenomena, and the intuitive-idealist, which allows you to approach the idea of nature as a "Whole". A speculative way that he does not actually walked. It seems like if it were

a matter of faith. He believed in that nature “full and harmonica” like it believe in a deity. Never speculated about such an idea, nor set an intuitive method of approach to natur, as did Goethe and Schelling. Anyway, the idea idealistic of nature prevails and it conditions all his speech. In the time he gets rid of the scaffold (the data empirical elaborations) and he begin the synthesis (as it does in Cosmos), holism it colors everything and very often, as revealed Ortega Valcárcel, we recognize a sense of wholeness and unity that is more reminiscent of classical representations of the cosmos of medieval roots, than modern empirical science.

Integrated whole, harmony between man and nature, this influence on morality, old ideas that took a boom in the Enlightenment and early Romanticism and now some see as preceding of environmental awareness. But the truth is that in his time those ideas were easier to maintain: its were ignorant, for example, the recent theories of chaos in the universe, and at that time, and more in the scenarios studied, the strong impact and changes that this society would provoke thereafter in nature, were still not significant enough. These ideas were dashed with Humboldt himself, because the same year of his death, 1859, Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, work with which imposing a new conception of nature, dominated by the hostility, adapting the strongest and the disappearance of the weak: “the war of nature, man and of death”.

As for the landscape, in German idealism we have seen it rarely leaves the painting. After emancipation as a separate theme in seventeenth-century painting, will become particularly important during the romanticism, at which time also seems to disengage of the mimicry and it spiritualize, but still not go out of the painting or the poetic description. Just Goethe reach detect shyly a landscape consideration as independent of the artistic representation, of the artwork, but not of aesthetic representation formed through sensitive contemplation of nature. In any event, for Schelling and Goethe the landscape -as a work of art or as contemplation aesthetic and sensitive-, plays a key role in their knowledge of nature like a whole. For its part, in the Humboldtian conception it can detect two dimensions in the use of the term landscape: as a aesthetic representation from individual contemplation of nature or captured in pictorial or poetic images, and the actual appearance of nature, useful for identifying and comparing geographic areas and determining causes of combinations of its elements. From these two dimensions, in my opinion, modernity and, above all, originality is in the second, because the aesthetic aspect comes rather from the German romantic idealist philosophy. However, this second dimension of the landscape, really geographical, appears blurred and little exploited. The landscape analysis itself is not developed, because as object it was still too undefined. It might opinions like of Hard, which considers that the landscape was never investigated for Humboldt but only an “aesthetic stimulation and a subject of literary description”, could be exaggerated. But the truth is that it had still very little of geographical landscape and a lot of aesthetic representation. As a real physiognomy of geographical space, the landscape appears rarely and rather indistinct: its descriptions are lacking the organization needed to be considered geographic object. That explains in part that had to wait more than half a century for the geographical landscape itself, freed from its aesthetic connotations, was formulated as a separate object for the German geographers of the *Landchaftsgeographie*.

