

Hellenism, nationalism and the ideology of research
in Humboldt's university ©

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Europe during and after the Enlightenment was transformed by the dynamics of modernity driving social, political, and economic change. Modernity's dislocations could be seen in the bifurcations and antagonisms noted by the early Romantics: antagonisms of nature and culture, life and intellect, individual and citizen. In light of such radical discontinuities with the past there is some irony in the fact that the assessment and articulations of the new conditions often drew on a dialogic relation with antiquity, in Germany specifically with Greek antiquity. Germany in the early nineteenth century was gripped by what Friedrich Paulsen, historian of the German universities, called 'Griechenenthusiasmus,' a kind of Hellenic madness whose effects are evinced in the title of E.M. Butler's well known book The Tyranny of Greece over Germany. This is not the occasion to discuss the reasons underlying the attraction to Greece experienced at this time not only in Germany but elsewhere in Europe. Different nations valued different things about classical antiquity, and their historical discourse regarding Greece and Rome, including the preference for one over the other, developed in response to national

priorities. As one scholar notes: 'No formula can sum up, no summary do justice to the perpetual revolution that was the nineteenth century's contact with the Greeks.'¹

Within the restricted limits of this paper my purpose is twofold. First, to note the significance of the 'contact with the Greeks' for the foundation of the University of Berlin and for the political and cultural objectives assigned to it which transcended the humanistic curriculum. Secondly, I want to illustrate how the process of inquiry (centered in the universities) that was used to advance these objectives ultimately devitalized their fulfillment and rendered problematic the meaning of the classical past, a legacy which still confronts us today.

To understand the influence of Hellenism we must take note of German national priorities after the Napoleonic conquest and the response to them by the great educational minister and founder of the University of Berlin, Wilhelm von Humboldt. He thought that proper study of the Hellenic past would intensify the emerging German national consciousness and reconcile it to the changes brought by modernity. Humboldt hoped that immersion in Greek culture would bring about national integration at the same time that it distinguished Germany from French culture which was rooted in the Roman tradition.² The vehicle for this task was to be the university. Growing industrialization and the new mercantile state threatened disruption of the harmony of the autonomous individual, and Humboldt envisioned an ideal totality of human life which was free from

¹. Anthony Grafton, 'Germany and the West 1830-1900,' in K.J. Dover, edit., Perceptions of the Ancient Greeks, London: Blackwell, 1992, p. 243.

². U. Preuß, Humanismus und Gesellschaft, New York & Bern, 1998, p. 6.

instrumentalist ends. He attempted to introduce the Greek ideal into the new curriculum of the university not simply as a scholarly subject but for the promulgation of cultural and intellectual harmony in those taking up the subject. The intellectual realization of this would come from study of the Greeks who had attained this type of existence for themselves.³ To Humboldt, the German people were uniquely like the ancient Greeks and thus, more than any others, would benefit from an intense exposure to their culture. He believed that the study of antiquity, specifically what men had been like in ancient Greece, would produce a new kind of society for Germany.⁴ Her citizens would benefit from the study of what the Greeks were really like because such study would reveal "some sort of idea" of a human perfection wherein maximum many-sidedness was ... integrated into a harmonious whole.⁵

As education minister he recruited to this endeavor as adviser on educational policy his friend, the great classical scholar Friedrich Wolf, in whom he saw a man who 'knew how this knowledge [of classical antiquity] should be applied so as to enhance the "Bildung" of the entire nation.'⁶ Wolf was in accord with Humboldt's claim in his 1793 essay on the study of antiquity that

³ . Horst Siebert, 'Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesen', in Joachim H. Knoll & Horst Siebert, Wilhelm von Humboldt: Politiker und Pädagoge, (Verlag Rudolf Miller) Bad Godesberg, 1967, p. 36.

⁴ . Ute Preuße, Humanismus und Gesellschaft, New York & Bern, 1998, p. 7, describes the conviction 'daß der am besten gebildete Bürger auch der beste Staatsbürger sei, ja, daß umgekehrt die Verfassung des Staates eine Prüfung am so gebildeten Bürger standhalten mußte.'

⁵ . Paul R. Sweet; Wilhelm von Humboldt. A Biography, 2 vols, Columbus, Ohio (Ohio State University Press), 1978, 1980; vol. 1, p. 127

⁶ . Paul R. Sweet; Wilhelm von Humboldt. A Biography, 2 vols., Columbus, Ohio (Ohio State University Press), 1978, 1980; vol. 2, p. 25.

The study of the characteristics of Greek culture is especially beneficial in an epoch when, for countless reasons, attention is more focused on masses of men than on individuals, more on external values and uses than on inner worth and enjoyment, and when a high and variegated culture has deviated very far from the earlier simplicity.⁷

Humboldt could assert this because to him, as to many others, the ancient Greeks had been portrayed as free from the fissures opening in the modern imagination, free, to quote Michael Hamburger on the German idealists, of

[the] grueling awareness of the disparity between mind and world, idea and reality, reflection and spontaneous impulse, art and nature —art in the wider sense that embraced what we now call civilization, all that is the result of conscious endeavour, science, ingenuity.⁸

Humboldt's program assumed that full human self-realization would follow from the encounter with the culture of classical antiquity. From it the individual could come to manifest in a new form and totality the Greek ideal of humanity. The study of antiquity at the university would thus be the means to attain that unity of body and soul, of

7. 'Über das Studium des Altertums und des griechischen insbesondere,' Gesammelte Schriften vol. 1. Translation from Paul R. Sweet, Wilhelm von Humboldt. A Biography, 2 vols., Columbus, Ohio (Ohio State University Press), 1978, 1980; vol. 2, p. 26.

8. Michael Hamburger, edit., Holderlin, Baltimore 1961, p. xvii

community and individual, the harmony of human capacities that were embodied by the Greeks.⁹

Both Wolf and Humboldt thought that this harmonious totality of human character would be formed as much by the intellectual and analytical skills gained in the practice of science (Wissenschaft) as by the actual knowledge of antiquity that scholarly analysis yielded.¹⁰

In this belief, the Humboldtian program for the University of Berlin contained contradictory ends.

Humboldt was aware that the changing nature of knowledge during the beginning of the nineteenth century included a central and expanding role for by research. Both he and F.A.Wolf had to acknowledge that the process of gaining knowledge had become more important than the knowledge itself, and argued that the process of investigation is what developed men's creative powers. Here began the so-called Forschungsimperativ, which bound the universities inextricably to a duty to create new knowledge. The paths of scientific knowledge and character formation began moving in separate directions. The intent to educate humanistic Bildung, the molding of character to national and cultural aspirations, came into direct conflict with the stimulus behind the development of Wissenschaft by the end of the 18th century.

⁹. Horst Siebert, 'Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesen', in Joachim H. Knoll & Horst Siebert, Wilhelm von Humboldt: Politiker und Pädagoge, (Verlag Rudolf Miller) Bad Godesberg, 1967, p. 36.

¹⁰. Horst Siebert, 'Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesens', in Joachim H. Knoll & Horst Siebert, Wilhelm von Humboldt: Politiker und Pädagoge, (Verlag Rudolf Miller)

Tension between the normative value gleaned from Greek antiquity (with its productive value for German citizenship) and the demands of Wissenschaft (emphasizing the priority of empirical description [Beschreibung]) were already evident to Winckelmann, the originating spirit of German philhellenism. Early on he had pleaded for a learning about the past which would not be just dead facts and would amount to more than the remembered sum total of what other minds have thought before. He wrote:

Life is much too short that we should let it slip away over a book from antiquity: and the entire science of antiquity is not worth this, since, even if we have become very learned, we know nothing except what another did or thought.¹¹

The new understanding of Wissenschaft assumed as its goal the practice of empirical research, free of pre-determined values, and aimed at establishing new objective facts.¹² This conflict is sometimes obscured in Wolf's work. In his Darstellung der Altertumswissenschaft of 1807, Wolf states that the goal of his discipline is 'knowledge of ancient man [Menschheit] himself' which on Humboldt's reasoning would

Bad Godesberg, 1967, p. 34 f.

¹¹. 'Das Leben...ist viel zu kurz als daß wir es über einem Buch vom Alterthum...verliehren sollten: und die gantze Wißenschaft des Alterthums ist dieses nicht werth, weil wir wenn wir sehr gelehrt werden, nichts wißen, als was andere gethan oder gedacht haben.' (*Briefe* iv, 7). Quoted in David Constantine, Early Greek Travelers and the Hellenic Ideal, Cambridge (Cambridge Univ. Press), 1984, p. 96

¹². Axel Horstmann, 'Die "Klassische Philologie" zwischen Humanismus und Historismus. Friedrich August Wolf und die Begründung der modernen Altertumswissenschaft', Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte 1 1978, p. 52.

be sufficient for the task of evoking Bildung. Yet Wolf also argued for the autonomy of Wissenschaft and its 'Selbsttätigkeit' which implicitly stepped away from the larger cultural goals of Bildung.

There were further developments in the structure of knowledge that eroded Humboldt's vision. Rudolph Stichweh¹³ has argued that before 1800, scholars and scientists had been concerned with a systematically unified order of the disciplines (Wissenschaften), but that after that time the plurality of disciplines had to be acknowledged. During the 18th century the academic disciplines had been thought of as entities of secure knowledge having a fixed relation to one another, and their demarcation from one another was considered static. This unity was lost as the disciplines became *historically variable unities* that took on *dynamic interrelations* with other disciplines within an overall system of knowledge. Stichweh points out that the disciplines were increasingly becoming self-referring closed systems, characterized by professional autonomy.

The principle contrast between the structure of knowledge in the 18th and the 19th centuries is that the 18th century, in a reflection of a hierarchical social structure, maintained a hierarchy of Faculties and, *a fortiore*, of the branches of knowledge. Christian Wolff in his "'Ratio Praelectionum' of 1735 codified the triad of history, philosophy and mathematics, ceding special significance to philosophy. This was based

on the belief that history had to do with "particular things" whereas philosophy was concerned with their grounds and causes. Wolff gave philosophy a fundamental role that comprehended all other areas of knowledge. The European tradition of 'scientia,' Stichweh notes, unfortunately had no place for empirical knowledge, which rendered it problematical as scientific investigations increased.

Stichweh observes that the 18th century triad of history, philosophy and mathematics institutionalized a *vertical or hierarchical differentiation* of knowledge. The entire scope of human knowledge was reconstructed into three separate realms, and none of the three was capable of being itself completely defined without reference to the other two. Here was created a sequence and succession of increasing perfection. The hierarchy of the faculties stabilized intellectual life and ensured cultural homogeneity. This organization of knowledge is reflected in that monument to the Enlightenment, the Encyclopédie of Diderot and d'Alembert where the totality of human knowledge was presented in clear alphabetical order, and where the unity of all knowledge was guaranteed by the privileged eye of philosophy.¹⁴

What Humboldt confronted then as he was organizing the University of Berlin was quite a different situation. Instead of the vertical or hierarchical differentiation of the Enlightenment, what was emerging were disciplines with a *horizontal differentiation*, in

¹³. Rudolph Stichweh, Zur Entstehung des modernen Systems wissenschaftlicher Disziplinen: Physik in Deutschland 1740-1890, Frankfurt (Suhrkamp Verlag), 1984.

¹⁴. See Erika Hültenschmidt, "Enzyklopädien, Wissensdifferenzierung und Sprachwissenschaften um 1800 (Frankreich)", in Gert Schubring, (Hrsg.) 'Einsamkeit und Freiheit' neu besichtigt. Universitätsreformen und disziplinenbildung in Preussen als

which any breaks in interdependence furthered the development of autonomous disciplines which addressed specific areas of reality. As Stichweh says, the Logic of the Modern is manifested in the replacement of a *rank ordering of the disciplines* by a system of *disciplines functioning horizontally, side-by-side with increasing heterogeneity*. Moreover, the disciplines separate not only internally into an increasing number of sub-disciplines, repeating the process of system-building *within* the system of disciplines, but they also separate themselves from the non-scientific and non-academic environment. This is a result of the tendency of disciplines each to develop a highly selective perception of the scientific and intellectual environment. The logic of the academic disciplines creates a multiplicity of perspectives on the world, and from this fact emerges a strongly decentralized structure of the system of knowledge (Wissenschafts-systems). No longer was there a place for a single representative voice, such as philosophy had had, such as theology had had, and, Humboldt hoped, such as Greek antiquity would have.

German enchantment with Greek antiquity drove the humanistic program of the university, and for a while was intensified by it in the form of the new science of antiquity, *Altertumswissenschaft*. The rapid development of this historical science, the ancient 'Realien,' the plethora of art works recovered, reported, and analyzed, along with the critical methods applied to the texts of the ancient world, weakened the paradigmatic powers which many gave or sought to give the past over the present. The result was the demythologization of the Greek past. The accumulation of facts effectively blunted the imaginative absorption of Greek antiquity.

Humboldt's hope that 'Wissenschaft' and 'Bildung' would advance side by side was undercut by the dynamics of Altertumswissenschaft as a discipline. Like other disciplines with pretensions of autonomy and positivist leanings towards empirical evidence (some called philology the 'Queen of the sciences') be they in the natural sciences or the Geisteswissenschaften, the science of classical antiquity developed its own self-referring order, its own methods and research programs, and while perhaps serving as a model for the historical sciences, became simply one among many investigative areas. Despite the shaking of the foundations of classical humanism, institutional inertia to a considerable degree retained the classical languages in school curricula, but their axiological priority eventually would give way to justification at times based on method and discipline for discipline's sake.

Humboldt himself was aware of this, for Goethe in his essay on Winckelmann credited to Humboldt the observation

The more that was learned about the past the less significance it seemed to have... as Humboldt himself had said there the gain for scholarship would come at the cost of the imagination.¹⁵

¹⁵. '...es kann höchstens ein Gewinn für die Gelehrsamkeit auf Kosten der Phantasie sein' (Gesammelte Schriften XII,109). Quoted in David Constantine; Early Greek Travelers and the Hellenic Ideal, Cambridge (Cambridge Univ. Press), 1984, p. 101