

# Chapter 5

## Humboldt's University: The History and Topicality of a German Tradition



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### Introduction

All attempts to reform a cultural or social institution rest on a set of ideas about the mission and function of that institution. This is especially true of research and higher education. As has been emphasised by Björn Wittrock (1993), the idea of the university cannot be seen as “a free-floating abstraction but a guiding conception, rooted in the experiences, traditions, and life-worlds of individuals”. Since the Enlightenment, these ideals have been tested and retested as society has changed. However, none of the major university reforms can be seen solely as a response to the emergence of modernity: “They occurred because leaders, thinkers, scholars, and scientists continually questioned the basic nature and meaning of higher learning”, argues Wittrock (1993, p. 347).

One of the most important of these ‘guiding conceptions’, at least today, is the one associated with Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835). This is true not only in Germany but also in the many countries that have been influenced by the German academic model. In the twenty-first century, the main features of the Humboldtian university programme are often summarised through a set of concepts or slogans: the combination of research and teaching; academic freedom (often expressed as *Lehr- and Lernfreiheit*); education rather than training; the idea of the unity of science and scholarship; and the community of students and teachers. Coupled to these academic ideals is a historiography in which the University of Berlin emerges as the first modern research university, an institution that was to provide the model for how research and higher education would be conducted both in and outside Germany (Paletschek 2012).

What is customarily presented as an unbroken line of ideas – the Humboldtian tradition – is, however, a much more complex affair. Recent research has

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problematised both its origins and its development. This chapter will discuss this scholarship and outline the history of the modern German university and the topicality of Humboldt's ideas.<sup>1</sup>

## A New German University

In many depictions of the German eighteenth century, the university is in a state of decay. The eighteenth-century university was intellectually dormant, it was constrained by nepotism and class privileges, and it provided an education that was scholastic and pedantic, at best encyclopaedic (Josephson et al. 2014). During the second half of the century, increasingly vociferous demands were raised for genuine reform. A growing opinion demanded that teaching should be reorganised and aimed at meeting the needs of the professions rather than dispensing old learning. Changing the university was, however, a slow and drawn-out process, and instead a number of special schools were established in order to fulfil the requirements of the new age. It was at these educational establishments, as well as at the science academies, that most of the research was to be conducted. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the university as an institution was thus not held in great repute. Along with the church, the university, with its mediaeval character and religious overtones, became the symbol of *l'ancien régime* (Hammerstein 1996).

More recently researchers have, from different perspectives, tested this idea about the eighteenth century – and ultimately relativised the significance of the establishment of the University of Berlin and the year 1810 as an academic *annus mirabilis*. Some of them have claimed that the enlightened rulers of the time were well aware of the stagnation and launched reforms in order to revitalise higher education (Anderson 2004). Others have promoted the idea that the creation of the modern university must be understood as a stage in the development of the bureaucratic state. For instance, in an innovative work, William Clark has argued that the growing state administration tried to limit the old academic freedom and increase political control (Clark 2006). At the same time, he claims – as do others – that the rise of the modern university must be seen in relation to an emergent book market and changes in the public sphere. Books became more easily accessible, more and more people began to take up their pens in order to express their opinions, and literacy increased significantly. All this led to professors being exposed to competition as authorities of knowledge (Josephson 2014).

What connects Clark to other scholars is his emphasis on the fact that a new and supporting foundation for the modern university had already been laid down during the eighteenth century. There is much to recommend these interpretations. At the same time, it is difficult to deny that the upheavals in European societies in the

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter is based on Östling (2018), and to some extent also on Östling (2015) and Östling (2016).

decades around the year 1800 – the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and all that followed – had a profound effect on the academic system. In hindsight, it seems as if two new main academic models, French and Prussian, emerged in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. In many parts of Europe, not least in the north, south, and in the British Isles, much would long remain as before; but in two large areas of the continent, things developed in a different direction (Charle 2004; Rüegg 2004). In France, the autonomy of the universities was completely circumscribed, and they were subordinated to the power of the political regime. *Collèges* and traditional faculties were replaced by a series of professional and special schools. Nevertheless, some older institutions, such as *Collège de France*, survived both the Revolution and Napoleon; and it was here, as at other educational establishments with a distinct profile, that much of French research was conducted. The overall result of these upheavals was that the academic reality in France during the nineteenth century came to be characterised by specialisation and fragmentation (Charle 2004; Rüegg 2004).

In Prussia, by contrast, the university as an idea and an institution was headed for a renaissance. Even in the eighteenth century, new elements had been incorporated into the academic activities at several German universities, in particular at Enlightenment, Göttingen and Halle. One such element that was particularly important was the requirement that professors should devote themselves to research and not just teach. Another was that lectures had to be complemented by seminars, a forum for scholarly discussion that included both students and teachers who were doing research (Turner 1974). In the medieval university, the philosophical faculty was the lowest in rank. By the end of the eighteenth century, increasing numbers of people had begun to question this old but still existing order. Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Schleiermacher all argued that the philosophical faculty should be placed on a par with, and even be given precedence over, the other three.

Therefore, the conclusion must be that much of what blossomed during the nineteenth century and became characteristic of the German university had been heralded earlier. Several minor reforms had been realised, and the debate about academic ideals was in full swing during the final years of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the emergence and establishment of a distinct Prussian university model must be linked to the major events from the period around the year 1800.

The French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars shaped an entire generation in the German regions. Not all areas were hit equally hard by French warfare and occupation, but in Prussia the humiliating setbacks – the defeats at Jena and Auerstedt, the siege of Berlin – gave rise to a strong and lasting reaction. Out of the resistance to the superior French forces grew an aversion to Enlightenment cosmopolitanism itself. This experience kindled a patriotic awakening, an incipient German nationalism with Prussian overtones. At the same time, the defeats occasioned a self-examination that paved the way for a reform of important social institutions, a reform eagerly anticipated by many people. In contrast to Revolutionary France, the changes were gradual. In the wake of the Napoleonic Wars significant reforms were undertaken, among them the liberation of the peasants from serfdom,

the emancipation of the Jews, freedom of trade, and compulsory military service, which were crucial for transforming Prussia from a feudal into a modern industrial state (Nipperdey 1983; Wehler 1987).

It is impossible to separate the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 from this political and social context (Tenorth 2012). In 1789, there were thirty-five universities in the German region, and almost half of whose students were registered at the big four (Halle, Göttingen, Jena, and Leipzig). A quarter of a century later, only sixteen universities remained; the others had been shut down or been forced to close in the aftermath of war and invasion. In addition, in 1807 Prussia lost its erstwhile academic flagship when the university in Halle became a part of the Napoleon-created kingdom of Westphalia. According to the King's oft-quoted words, the state now had to replace the physical losses through spiritual strength: "*der Staat muss durch geistige Kräfte ersetzen, was er an physischen verloren hat*" (Östling 2018 p. 28). Even so, one cannot ignore the fact that the transformation of the Prussian educational system was not only an important stage in a general reform effort, but also a concrete attempt to launch an alternative to the Napoleonic special schools. The fact that two other universities, both bearing the epithet Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, were established in Prussia at the same time, in Breslau in 1811 and in Bonn in 1818, does not weaken this impression (McClelland 1980).

The University of Berlin was not, of course, created in an intellectual vacuum. Since the end of the eighteenth century, the idea of the university had been discussed in a good number of publications and debates. Jena in Thuringia was one important centre for this exchange of opinions. During one period, in particular during the 1790s, the city counted many of the most prominent thinkers among its professors, among them Friedrich Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich von Schelling, and August Wilhelm Schlegel. Even more important for the creative atmosphere was the steady stream of authors, artists, and philosophers who came to Jena during these years for brief or extended stays. This environment inspired ideas about a new kind of educational establishment, an institution, which has been called 'the romantic university', with *Bildung*, academic freedom, and the collective research process as its corner stones (Karlsohn 2012).

There are scholars who have claimed that the University of Berlin was an 'institutionalisation of the ideal of Jena' (Ziolkowski 1990, p. 286). To some extent, it can be seen that way, but the new university that took shape also had its own specific prehistory. As early as 1784, a suggestion had been made to establish a university in Berlin. During the first years of the nineteenth century, many of the ideas that had been current in Jena were developed further, and, in their writings, men like Schelling, Fichte, Schleiermacher, and Steffens laid an intellectual foundation for a new university, guided by ideals of *Bildung* and pure scholarship (Anrich 1960).

In one of these publications, Schleiermacher also asked a very concrete question: "But why in Berlin of all places?" He believed that other Prussian locations would find it easier to attract students and teachers than the expensive and comparatively peripheral capital, but he also saw obvious advantages in Berlin. It already had large libraries, an observatory, zoological and anatomical cabinets, and other facilities that could be of use to the new university. The same was true of the many special

schools that had been erected on the banks of and near the River Spree (vom Bruch 2001).

The following year, in July 1809, the Prussian King Frederick William III received an official letter with a similar content. In it, the author argued that a general institution of higher education should be established. The official letter bore the signature Wilhelm von Humboldt. He was at this time head of the section for educational and cultural issues in the Prussian Ministry of the Interior, but he had had time to do many other things before this (vom Bruch 2001).

## Wilhelm von Humboldt and His Ideas

Wilhelm von Humboldt was born in Potsdam on 22 June 1767. Together with his brother Alexander, two years younger and destined to become famous as a natural scientist and explorer, Wilhelm von Humboldt had been given a thorough education, which was typical for the nobility of his time. For one year, 1787, he was registered at the university in Frankfurt an der Oder, but he soon moved to the more dynamic one in Göttingen, where the combination of *Bildung* and Enlightenment made a lasting impression on him. After studying for four terms, he went on a peregrination in Western Europe, before entering into the service of the Prussian government in 1790. But after only a year or so he left his post, intending to wholeheartedly devote himself to study and writing. For a few fruitful years, 1794–1797, he lived in Jena and was able to cultivate his philosophical and philological interests in the company of Schiller, Fichte, and the Schlegel brothers. Following a lengthy sojourn in Romance Europe and a brief interlude in Berlin, Humboldt functioned as a Prussian diplomat at the Holy See in 1802–1808. However, he was recalled to the Prussian capital. During sixteen productive months, from February 1809 to June 1810, he would leave a deep impression on the educational system (Scurlo 1970; Sweet 1978–1980).

Humboldt's efforts were initially focused on breathing life into and reforming the Prussian school system. His pedagogic vision encompassed all educational stages, from elementary school through the *Gymnasium* to the university. In the summer of 1809, he therefore sent the above-mentioned official letter to Frederick William III about establishing a new university in Berlin. In August of the same year, the King approved the proposal. It was over a year before teaching and research could commence in October 1810 at the *alma mater berlinensis*. Operations began on a small scale – 262 students and 25 professors during the first term – and there were no statutes to speak of until six years later (Tenorth 2012).

Nevertheless, the new university soon won academic renown, largely owing to the fact that Humboldt managed to persuade so many truly prominent scholars to accept important professorial chairs. Fichte became the first holder of the key professorship in philosophy (and, in addition, the Vice-Chancellor of the university for a brief period) and was succeeded in 1818 by Hegel. A number of significant scholarly environments evolved over the years, for instance, around the historian Leopold

von Ranke and the physiologist Johannes Müller. By that time, Wilhelm von Humboldt had long ago left his position in the Prussian ministry of the interior (Tenorth 2012).

Wilhelm von Humboldt, the ideologue of the university, was not a rebel against the trends of his time. He was a skilled synthesist who became successful by systematically combining thoughts that were in circulation and finding pregnant expressions for his own ideas. During his brief time in Berlin in 1809–1810 he converted his words into action. Perhaps it can be said that Humboldt managed to turn a reform against the university into a reform of the university.

Like no other concept, that of *Bildung* has been linked to Wilhelm von Humboldt – justly so, for it was key to his educational philosophy. At the same time, the word *Bildung* itself has a long history in the German language. Its meaning has gradually expanded in the course of the centuries, and in the eighteenth century it was increasingly given the meaning of ‘to form’ or ‘to shape’. It was in the decades surrounding the year 1800 that the word had a real impact on the debate of ideas and in the consciousness of the emerging educated middle classes (*Bildungsbürgertum*). Even if it appeared in various guises, their common sustenance was the specific combination of German New Humanism, Enlightenment thought, and idealism that characterised the intellectual climate in German-speaking Europe at that time. It is significant that *Bildung* lacks a direct equivalent in other major languages. Translations such as *éducation*, *formation* or *self-cultivation* do not quite capture the German meaning (Vierhaus 1972; Lichtenstein 1971; Koselleck 1990).

As a pedagogical idea, the German *Bildung* is related to concepts that are significantly older. It can be traced back to the Greek *paideia*, an early programme for a comprehensive development of human spiritual, aesthetic, and physical abilities with the aim of moulding a complete and harmonious citizen. The concept of *Bildung* that emerged during the eighteenth century was, in addition, inspired by a late medieval reinterpretation of the old Christian idea that human beings should strive to become an image of God, *imago Dei*. Traces of this way of thinking can be found, for instance, in the works of an influential educational theorist such as Johann Gottfried von Herder. He was one of the first to design a somewhat more coherent pedagogic vision with *Bildung* as its lodestar, where the overarching purpose was to develop the capacities of the individual and break with an ideal that rewarded rote learning of a closed curriculum. Many of the great figures of the day – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich von Schiller, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Immanuel Kant – referred to Herder and contributed to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century dynamic discussion about *Bildung* (Koselleck 1990).

Nevertheless, it was not until the actions of Wilhelm von Humboldt that the concept of *Bildung* was truly integrated into an educational programme and given institutional stability. To Humboldt and his contemporaries, *Bildung* had to do with the highest and most harmonious development of natural human abilities. His theoretical expositions on the concept of *Bildung* demonstrated a kind of duality in his thought. On the one hand, he described an educational process in which the unrestricted improvement of each person’s personality was at the centre. Humboldt’s *Bildung* was based on a subjective acquisition of knowledge that had its origins in

and transformed the individual. On the other hand, an individual's development was always considered in relation to history and to the truly human. The realisation of that individual's inner potential took place in a dialectical movement between the self and the surrounding culture (von Humboldt 1960).

Humboldt was as much a practically disposed as a theoretically orientated man, and his idea about *Bildung* emerges most concretely in the proposals, memoranda, and drafts that he wrote during his years as a Prussian minister. In various documents from 1809, he outlined an educational system that would provide its pupils with what he called *Menschenbildung*. Pupils would orientate themselves towards the truly human, towards the major intellectual abilities. Humboldt emphasised the importance of wide-ranging studies in languages, history, and mathematics; but the classical subjects, primarily Greek, held an obvious special position for him (von Humboldt 1964a; von Humboldt 1964b).

In other words, the idea of *Bildung* held a central position in Humboldt's educational philosophy, and this ideal was also thoroughly foundational to his idea of the university. His academic vision emerges most clearly in "Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin". In this short, unfinished manifesto, written at the end of 1809 or in 1810, many of the basic ideas that later came to be invoked in the Humboldtian tradition can be found (von Humboldt 1964c).<sup>2</sup>

Next to *Bildung*, the idea of science and scholarship (*Wissenschaft*) was a cornerstone in Humboldt's conception of the university. In his manifesto from 1809–1810, there was an obvious connection between them: Humboldt maintains that the university should be a place where science and scholarship in their most profound, extensive, and pure sense have their abode. He emphasises that since "these institutions can only fulfil their purpose when each of them bears continuously in mind the pure idea of science and scholarship, their dominant principles must be freedom and the absence of distraction (*Einsamkeit*)" (von Humboldt 1970, p. 243).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to schools, which provide fixed and finished knowledge, science/scholarship should be seen as "an as yet unsolved problem which always calls for further research". The university stands or falls based on how well it safeguards the principle that science/scholarship should be seen as – to use a key formulation – "something not yet achieved and as something that cannot ever be completely achieved". Humboldt is faithful to his idea of *Bildung* when he emphasises that it is only the science/scholarship that originates within people that can shape character, and that it has to be the goal of both the state and humanity to produce character and action, not "superficial knowledge and empty talk". In order to achieve this, everything must originate in an ideal, and all types of one-sidedness must be opposed (von Humboldt 1970, pp. 244–245).

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<sup>2</sup>I henceforth quote from Humboldt (1970), but with some modifications. For a more detailed discussion on translation, see Östling (2018).

<sup>3</sup>*Einsamkeit* is in this context normally translated as 'solitude' and not 'the absence of distraction', and I follow this practice.

Humboldt also develops ideas about academic freedom. The state must not treat its universities as *Gymnasien* or special schools, and it must not use them as store-rooms of useful experts. On the contrary, the state must not demand anything from the academy that directly involves the state itself. Instead, writes Humboldt, “[the state] should [...] adhere to a deep conviction that if the universities achieve their purpose, they will realise the purpose of the state as well, and on a far higher plane”. The main duty of the state becomes to ensure that its schools serve the higher scholarly institutions. If these schools are established and managed in an ideal way, their pupils will carry a desire within them to devote themselves to scholarship (von Humboldt 1970, pp. 246–247).

Humboldt’s high valuation of academic freedom was thus closely connected to his general ideals of *Bildung* and education. At the same time, academic freedom is a multifaceted concept. In his text Humboldt also discusses the issue of the external organisation of the university, especially how academic posts should be filled. He argues for the idea that it should not be the faculties or the scholarly representatives who should make these decisions. Instead, it is the state that should possess this power, for two reasons: the faculties cannot be expected to make a fair assessment of the candidates; and – more importantly – the interests of the state and the university are so intimately connected that the state has to have discretionary power when it comes to appointing professors (von Humboldt 1970, p. 249).

Towards the end of his text from 1809–1810, Humboldt polemised against the idea that the university should focus on teaching and that research should only be conducted at special academies. The process of science and scholarship is doubtlessly more rapid and lively at the university, he wrote, “where their problems are discussed back and forth by a large number of forceful, vigorous, and youthful intelligences”. If science and scholarship are not regarded as being changeable, they are not worthy of those designations (von Humboldt 1970, pp. 247–248).

In today’s research, many people emphasise Humboldt’s unfinished fragment from 1809–1810 as a key document for understanding his idea of the university. From this and a couple of other writings from the same period, the academic principles that have come to be associated with Humboldt can be deduced: academic freedom; the combination of teaching and research; the sense of community between teachers and students; science and scholarship as *Bildung*. However, the Humboldtian tradition is much richer and more nebulous; it cannot be captured in a couple of points. Its transformation during the two centuries that have passed reflects the turbulent history of Germany.

## Humboldt’s Nineteenth Century

Wilhelm von Humboldt died on 8 April 1835. During the twenty-five years that had passed since he left his position as the person responsible for education in the Prussian ministry, he had devoted himself to diplomacy and linguistics. Initially he had been an emissary in Vienna and had helped shape the new order of Europe after



the defeat of Napoleon. At the end of the 1810s he had retired, settled in Tegel, and dedicated much of the remainder of his life to extensive linguistic studies (Scuria 1970; Sweet 1978–1980).

The development of the University of Berlin after Humboldt's death has been assessed in various ways. Some narratives about the period from the second quarter of the nineteenth century and forward are characterised by decline and decay. They differ in emphasis, but what they have in common is an interest in how an academic vision, sprung from revolutionary or even utopian dreams, hardened into conservative ideology and Prussian ideas about the national state. These historiographies feature variations on the theme of a slow farewell to the original ideals (Ringer 2000; Haase 2012).

Other scholars construct a more complex balance sheet. In the new history of the university at Unter den Linden, two of the main authors, Heinz-Elmar Tenorth and Charles E. McClelland, offer a comprehensive assessment. Tenorth (2012) asserts that Wilhelm von Humboldt played a crucial part in the foundation of the new university, but not in the sense that he formulated a set of philosophical principles that then permeated all official actions and institutional arrangements. Instead, Tenorth emphasises the fact that Humboldt initiated the political-administrative process and reconciled conflicting interests. His idea of the momentous importance of research had a real impact, but this was because new features of academic practice (which had gradually taken shape during the eighteenth century) were given an institutional basis. Those features were, primarily, that publication of new scholarly/scientific knowledge was rewarded; that an infrastructure in the form of seminars and laboratories was seen as indispensable; that professors developed a professional identity; and that recruitment to academic posts was based on scholarly/scientific merits. All this contributed to making the research imperative a reality, according to Tenorth.

McClelland (2012) for his part maintains that the conditions in which the University of Berlin operated were completely different at the beginning in comparison to the end of the nineteenth century. The university was born from a defeat, and for a long time it had only a few students. To the extent that an ideal regarding the combination of research and education became a reality during its first phase, this had more to do with pragmatic necessity than with ideological principles. From the 1870s onward, the university went through rapid expansion, and its reputation grew; at the same time, conditions, with respect to both society and science/scholarship, changed during the time leading up to the First World War. McClelland therefore cautions against a simplified historiography, irrespective of whether this takes the form of success stories or narratives of decline (see also McClelland 2016).

It is possible, however, to apply a completely different perspective to the legacy from Humboldt. In this perspective, the actual university on Unter den Linden and its development during the nineteenth century are not placed at the centre. Instead, it is the symbolism and the formation of myths that surround Humboldt – what in German has come to be called the *Mythos Humboldt* – that form the essential factor.

The central proposition of this research about Humboldt is that he was never a point of reference in the German nineteenth-century discussion about the university: his fame did not come until later. The scholar who has most persistently

championed the idea of Humboldt's absence is Sylvia Paletschek (2001a, b, 2002), but she has been supported by historians such as Mitchell G. Ash (1997), Rüdiger vom Bruch (1997), Dieter Langewiesche (2010), and Marc Schalenberg (2002). According to Paletschek, Humboldt's programmatic texts remained unknown or even unpublished. Presentations of the history of the university contained references to writings by Schleiermacher, Fichte, and Steffens, works written at the time of the foundation of the University of Berlin. Other people too, famous in their own time but since forgotten, featured in depictions of the early nineteenth-century university. Wilhelm von Humboldt's name was rarely, if ever, mentioned.

According to this line of research, the University of Berlin was by no means a beacon in the academic archipelago of the time. Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, as it was renamed in 1828, was one university among others. Nothing in its statutes revealed that a new kind of university had seen the light of day. Although many people had eagerly supported another order, the faculty hierarchy remained the same as before: theology, law, medicine, and finally philosophy. Even when it came to its administrative structure, its forms of examination, and the subjects of its professorships, the university in Berlin did not differ significantly from other universities in the German region (Paletschek 2001b).

Nor did the University of Berlin function as an exemplary model in nineteenth-century intellectual discussions. In handbooks, encyclopaedias, and surveys, German New Humanist ideas and Prussian university reform were not presented as turning points in the historical development. In none of these contexts was the creation of the University of Berlin given a paradigmatic significance. It was mentioned in passing (Paletschek 2001b).

Throughout the nineteenth century, a debate continued about the German university. Judging from the number of publications, it was at its most intense during the 1830s and 1840s, although a good deal was also published on this topic around the year 1800 and during the last decades of the century. Occasionally the German New Humanist university tracts from the early 1800s were referred to; but the focal points of the debate were often concrete problems concerning examinations, forms of study, and the working conditions of the teachers (Paletschek 2001b). In all essentials, the old hierarchy endured. It was not until towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century that the research mission came to the forefront (Paletschek 2001b).

Consequently, it is impossible to speak of a Berlinesque or a Humboldtian model in the German academic debate during the nineteenth century. It is true that the University of Berlin is sometimes mentioned as a young and dynamic university. On the other hand, it did not have any immediate effect on the development of the German university system. The ideals that had been formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt did not provide fruitful input in the discussion about the university.

Along with the *Gymnasium*, the military system, and classical music, it was claimed that the university was the major successful German export during the era of the German Empire. As the nineteenth turned into the twentieth century, university systems were reformed in line with the German pattern in parts of Europe, North America, and East Asia. The process was lengthy and complex, however, and

it evinced many national variations; there was never a question of seamlessly transferring a German model to another culture (Schwinges 2001). In a major study, Marc Schalenberg (2002) has disproved all simple theories of diffusion. In France there were many people who were influenced by Germany, but they did not embrace an entire idea; rather, they turned towards their neighbouring country for arguments to use when promoting their own cause. In Britain people were, on the whole, markedly reserved with respect to German notions, and it took a long time before any effect worth mentioning could be observed there. Johns Hopkins University, founded in Baltimore in 1876, became the first American university that expressly endeavoured to unite academic education with scholarly/scientific research. During the final decades of the century, a number of researchers who had recently received their doctorates at Johns Hopkins began working at other distinguished American universities, thereby contributing to the circulation of the new ideas. It should be noted, however, that it was the German university that was the model. Wilhelm von Humboldt was not mentioned (Turner 2001; Geiger 1986).

## The Discovery of Humboldt

Around 1900, however, something happened. In his work on a book about Humboldt, the historian Bruno Gebhardt made a weighty discovery in the very last year of the nineteenth century. In an archive, he found the above-mentioned unpublished memorandum “Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin”. All at once, Humboldt's short, unfinished treatise of 1809–1810 became central in the turn-of-the-century university debate (Östling 2018).

Humboldt's text was used not only to justify basic research in general. It proved equally useful for sanctioning the research university that only at the beginning of the twentieth century was fully developed in Germany. Humboldt bestowed on this type of knowledge institution a nearly century-long prior history. His rediscovered treatise, somewhat paradoxically, also provided arguments for those who sought to work for research institutes outside university, such as the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft, which was founded in 1911. When its first president, Adolf von Harnack, wanted to legitimate the new, independent research institutes, he cited Humboldt. He interpreted Humboldt's century-old programme as meaning that development of scholarship called for academies, universities and also relatively autonomous institutes – the latter appropriately in the form of Kaiser Wilhelm Institutes. These dedicated research establishments were intended to help assert Germany's academic status in the international competition. In this respect, they were successful, even after 1945, when they lived on under the name of Max Planck Institutes (Paletschek 2002).

The success narrative about the University of Berlin found its proudest expression when, in 1910, its centennial was celebrated. The philosopher Eduard Spranger was exceptionally important. In his fervent speeches and writings, Spranger consolidated the notion of Wilhelm von Humboldt as originator of the modern German

university. Better than anyone else, Humboldt had reconciled free scholarship with the state, creating a remarkable unity (Paletschek 2002).

In this wider perspective, the ‘Humboldtian Renaissance’ of the early twentieth century becomes merely part of a long discussion about the essence of the modern German university. With varying intensity, this discussion has continued ever since. In the changeable intellectual terrain of the Weimar Republic, Humboldt cropped up in many guises. For Carl Heinrich Becker, the education minister in the 1920s and an influential debater, the German university was *im Kern gesund*, but all the same, he eagerly propounded adjustment to a new democratic age. In the Third Reich, Humboldt was a hated figure, embodying a humanist tradition that was considered essential to overcome. Those who openly espoused his ideas, such as René König, were shown the door. As a signpost and intellectual reservoir, the Humboldtian tradition was and remained significant.<sup>4</sup>

## The Postwar Period

By the time the war ended in 1945, many higher-education institutions had been reduced to rubble, numerous academics were ideologically compromised, and German scholarship was in a bottomless crisis. In these difficult circumstances, intellectual reflection on the idea of the university simultaneously began. One central question that engaged many of Germany’s leading thinkers was how to revive the ravaged nation (Östling 2016).<sup>5</sup>

The single most important voice in the debate was that of the philosopher Karl Jaspers. In speeches, articles and the book *Die Idee der Universität* (1946), he discussed how to vitalise universities after the great disaster. In the Third Reich, married to a Jewess, he had been forced to leave his positions in academic management and become subject to a publication ban. After the war ended, Jaspers saw it as his task to restore the moral and intellectual honour of Germany. What this required was a historical balance sheet – a summary of the German nation’s liabilities and assets. A genuine return therefore presupposed also making the most of what was good in, and could be built on, the German heritage. Here, the university played a crucial role.

Jaspers was convinced that the core of the German university was intact. Despite the Nazis’ inroads into research and education, there were professors and students who had held out against them. Now it was time to reawaken the spirit of scholarship. This could happen only if the university once more became a hothouse of free research and teaching. In addition, it was crucial for the university to include all human activity and promote a broad concept of education (Jaspers 1946).

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<sup>4</sup>For a more detailed account of the 1920s and 1930s, see Östling (2018).

<sup>5</sup>For a more detailed account of how the German universities engaged with the legacy of National Socialism and militarism in the wake of the Second World War, see Östling (2018).

Karl Jaspers was a typical exponent of a substantial proportion of German professors. These learned humanists with deep roots in the educational culture of their own country set the tone in the debate of the occupation years. In common with historians like Gerhard Ritter and philologists like Karl Vossler, Jaspers embraced a neo-humanist university ideal with origins around the year 1800. All these thinkers argued in favour of well-known academic principles, not infrequently citing Wilhelm von Humboldt and the University of Berlin. With war and dictatorship fresh in their memories, they emphasised the importance of academic freedom and the pure quest for knowledge (Östling 2016).

In the early 1960s, discussions about the university flared up again. It was an era when, in the West German academic community, pessimism was being superseded by trust. During the first decade after the war, it had been increasingly clear that the country's universities were inhibited by a rigid academic culture, and that there was a need for reform. Now a new generation took over. They adopted a stance on the emerging mass university's place in modern, democratic, industrial society, but also posed questions about freedom of research, the content of education, and the orientation of studies (Östling 2018).

Along with Ralf Dahrendorf and Jürgen Habermas, Helmut Schelsky had a powerful voice in this debate. A sociologist, he had come to the fore in the 1950s as a leading social scientist in the Federal Republic. In 1963, Schelsky published the most thorough postwar contribution to the discussion on the idea of the university: *Einsamkeit und Freiheit*. Schelsky, too, argued that Humboldt's ideas were still relevant. The University of Berlin had rested on two fundamental ideas: an intellectual one, expressed in the slogan *Bildung durch Wissenschaft* and a social one captured in the formula *Einsamkeit und Freiheit*. The former ideal contradicts the idea that the university should provide knowledge of practical use. Schelsky agreed with Humboldt that the primacy of research must prevail and that the function of university was never to mediate a series of dogmas. Instead, students should be inculcated with a basic normative attitude in life and trained to become intellectually independent. In the second set of principles, solitude and freedom, the basic social idea of the university found expression. By 'solitude', Schelsky meant that a measure of social isolation was necessary for good academic research and teaching. 'Freedom' entailed taking the side of knowledge with no set purpose in polemic against the notion of the university as a provider of academic vocational training (Schelsky 1963).

When Schelsky turned from history to contemplating his own day, he came up against difficulties. The classic ideal of education still lived on in memory, but in practice the university of the 1960s had abandoned the idea that it should shape a basic normative attitude, work for an association between research and teaching, and preserve the kind of academic freedom that preferred solitude. To Schelsky, it was clear that a veritable reform of university was needed. His proposed a more differentiated university – but one in which the various parts jointly formed the foundation of an academically based ideal of education. With this background, he proposed the setting-up of a new kind of university was required: the 'theoretical university'. Activities should be concentrated on the theories of the various

disciplines, and collaboration across subject boundaries should be rewarded (Schelsky 1963).

To Schelsky, Humboldt's view was an essential asset that nevertheless had to be constantly renewed and reinterpreted. Far from everyone agreed. To numerous socialist and liberal debaters of the 1960s, Humboldt was largely a dead weight and a hindrance to longed-for democratic reforms. But in shaping their idea of the university they, too, were unable to ignore the German academic heritage.

## New Century, New Humboldt

The first decade of the twenty-first century was characterised by reforms and wide-ranging initiatives in Germany. After the reunification in 1990, a great deal of energy had been expended on incorporating the East German higher education institutions into the West German system. At the beginning of the new millennium, however, it was clear that the German universities had to be remoulded. The European Bologna process reshaped the old structure of education, and substantial funds were invested in cutting-edge research within the framework of the German *Exzellenzinitiative* (Östling 2018).

As so often happens when a university undergoes rapid internal transformation, a feud arose about the basic issues. When academics' life-world judders and changes shape, they respond in writing. In very many publications, the name of Wilhelm von Humboldt recurred time and again. The Prussian education reformer was, to many, a corrective to contemporary market adaptation and the cult of usefulness.

One of the most acclaimed books about university education published in recent years is Jochen Hörisch's *Die ungeliebte Universität* (2006), with the subtitle *Rettet die Alma Mater!* Hörisch's approach was broad, and his work took on the form of a general review of the academic world. The growing workload, the research application hysteria, the changed status of professors in society, the dictates and primacy of money – he covered all these aspects. In contrast to many other people's writings, however, Wilhelm von Humboldt was not invoked as a saviour. This did not prevent him from returning to the Humboldtian tradition. Hörisch thought something absolutely fundamental had been lost in the classic German research university: students and professors no longer love their alma mater. The strong emotional relationship with the university, the almost erotic desire that characterised academics in the past has disappeared. To revive this dormant love relationship, a new academic sense of community must be created.

Christoph Marksches, President of the Humboldt University of Berlin in 2006–2010, issued a collection of writings and speeches, *Was von Humboldt noch zu lernen ist* (Marksches 2010), ahead of the bicentennial. Marksches, a Protestant theologian, resolved the basic issue in the book – what may still be learnt from Humboldt – by proclaiming a number of theses. Refraining from empty, speechifying reverence for the monument that is Humboldt, he declared that we must read the original documents to see what he had to tell us. The early nineteenth century was

permeated by the all-inclusive dreams of romanticism. Markschiefs saw clear limitations in such notions, but simultaneously expressed a strong belief that present-day universities, too, can overcome dualistic ways of thinking and create an understanding that goes far beyond specialist studies or subject boundaries. To him, Humboldt was more or less an interlocutor, a provider of ideas whom one could revisit to discuss matters with and test one's ideas upon.

## Humboldt's Topicality

Identifying highly time-bound interpretations of the German academic heritage is not difficult. Nor is it hard to see that some features were more prominent during certain periods than in others. It is also possible to see how the meaning of academic freedom, the content of *Bildung*, and the university's relationship to the state have varied. More generally, it is obvious that the university which Humboldt helped realise was an elitist, aristocratic institution – far from the egalitarian, democratic mass university that has developed during the post-Second World War era.

This being said, the vigorous strands of consistency must be emphasised. There are a limited number of fundamental ideals in the Humboldtian tradition that turned out to have a particular ability to survive and speak to various university cultures. These ideals have served as a model and a landmark in extremely dissimilar periods. I would like to believe that this is where the topicality of Humboldt can be found even today.

Firstly, the Humboldtian tradition has been used throughout the modern era in order to defend an acquisition of knowledge that goes beyond vocational programmes and instrumental usefulness. This happened at the turn of the century in 1800, 1900, and 2000, respectively. In our own time, which is at least as beset by utilitarianism as any other, it contains an understanding of how studies can promote civic and human development. The Anglo-Saxon liberal-arts tradition encompasses a related pedagogic vision, but that vision usually lacks any elaborate idea about the importance of research for the dynamics of knowledge.

Secondly, the Humboldtian model has often been used as a synonym for the modern research university. There is a very good reason for this: the free search for new knowledge has been a cornerstone from the very beginning. Science and scholarship should, in Humboldt's words, be regarded as dealing with "as yet unsolved problem[s] which always [call] for further research". When research is reduced to a set of great societal challenges, usually defined by policy-makers and bureaucrats, people need to be reminded of the importance of having the ability to formulate original questions and test bold hypotheses against reality. Otherwise, there is a danger that research in the true sense of the word will wither away.

Thirdly, the idea of the combination of research and education is closely linked to this notion of the significance of research. Underlying that principle is the conviction that there should be a dynamic connection between these two academic activities. Their coalescence stimulates movement in both directions and contributes to a

continuous renewal of the education and a firmer anchoring in reality for research. Today, this ideal may serve as a memento for those who, in various ways, promote a division between education and research.

Finally, at a higher level, the Humboldtian model may be viewed as an unusually coherent and well-thought-out idea of what distinguishes an ideal university. This idea is underpinned by a set of clear academic principles that at the same time permit variation – principles which, thanks to their adaptability, have had relevance in various historical contexts. Without being tied to a certain societal system or committed to a particular political movement, the Humboldtian model has, more than any other comparable vision, represented an idea about the university as an autonomous world with its own logic and its own system of norms that are not the same as those of ideology, the market, or usefulness for the state.

Seen in this light, there is an unquestionable value in bringing the Humboldtian tradition into the contemporary debate and recalling what it has represented in various ages. As a historically evolved phenomenon, it harbours a wealth of reflections and experiences, of sobering correctives and intoxicating dreams.

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