

## Wilhelm von Humboldt and his idea

### A modern 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 within, among other things, veterinary medicine, mining, and commerce in order to fulfil the requirements of the new age. It was at these educational establishments, as well as at the science

---

1 Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866: Bürgerwelt und starker Staat* (Munich, 1983), p. 57; Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 331–33; Howard, *Protestant Theology*, pp. 80–81. See also the discussion in Josephson, Karlsruh, & Östling, ‘Humboldtian Tradition’, pp. 3–7. Sections of this chapter have previously been published as Johan Östling, ‘Humboldts idé: Bildning och universitet i det moderna Tyskland’, in *Humaniora i kunskapssambället: En nordisk debattbok*, ed. by Jesper Eckhart Larsen & Martin Wiklund (Malmö, 2012); Johan Östling, ‘The Humboldtian Tradition: The German University Transformed, 1800–1945’, in *University Jubilees and University History at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, ed. by Dhondt; Johan Östling, ‘What Is a University? Answers to a Very German Question’, in *Thinking Ahead: Research, Funding and the Future: RJ Yearbook 2015/2016*, ed. by Jenny Björkman & Björn Fjæstad (Göteborg, 2015); and Johan Östling, ‘Vad är ett universitet? Svar på en mycket tysk fråga’, in *Tänka vidare: Forskning, finansiering, framtid: RJ:s årsbok 2015/2016*, ed. by Jenny Björkman & Björn Fjæstad (Göteborg, 2015).

academies, that most of the practical and theoretical research was to be conducted. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the university as an institution was thus not held in great repute either among utilitarian natural scientists, rationalist Enlightenment philosophers, or the emergent bourgeoisie. Along with the church, the university, with its mediaeval character and religious overtones, became the symbol of *l'ancien régime*.<sup>2</sup>

More recently researchers have, from different perspectives, tested this idea about the eighteenth century – and ultimately relativised the significance of the establishment of the Berlin university 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. Seen from this perspective, the continued development during the nineteenth century mainly becomes the completion of a transformation that was already under way.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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. Ultimately, their role was transformed. The writing, pioneering researcher became an ideal.<sup>5</sup>

---

2 *A History of the University in Europe: Universities in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800)*, ed. by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 52–80.

3 Anderson, *European Universities*, pp. 4, 20–38, and 51–52.

4 William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago, 2006).

5 Clark, *Academic Charisma*; Thomas H. Broman, *The Transformation of German Academic Medicine, 1750–1820* (Cambridge, 1996); Peter Josephson, 'Böcker eller universitet? Om ett tema i tysk utbildningspolitisk debatt kring 1800', *Lychmos*, 2009; Peter Josephson, 'The Publication Mill: The Beginnings of Publication History as an Academic Merit in German Universities, 1750–1810', in *The Humboldtian Tradition*, ed. by Josephson, Karlsohn & Östling; Thomas Karlsohn, *Originalitetens former: Essäer om bildning och universitet* (Göteborg, 2012), pp. 30–35 and 37–61; Peter Josephson, 'Publicitetens politiska ekonomi: Introduktion av skriftställarskap som merit

What connects Clark to other scholars is his emphasis on the fact that a new and supporting foundation for the modern university was laid down already 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 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, the French and the Prussian one, 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.<sup>6</sup> 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

---

vid tyska universitet 1750–1810’, *Lychnos*, 2014; Chad Wellmon, *Organizing Enlightenment: Information Overload and the Invention of the Modern Research University* (Baltimore, 2015). The transformation of German political and intellectual culture during the latter half of the eighteenth century is discussed in a number of foundational studies from the time after the Second World War, among them Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Munich, 1959); Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied, 1962); and Friedrich A. Kittler, *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* (Munich, 1985).

6 Walter Rüegg, ‘Themes’, in *A History of the University in Europe: Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. by Rüegg, pp. 3–13; Christophe Charle, ‘Patterns’, in *A History of the University in Europe: Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, ed. by Rüegg, pp. 33–40; Anderson, *European Universities*, pp. 3–4. Some historians have questioned the strict division between a French and a German model. They argue that both systems evolved in parallel and that there were many French educational establishments where research was de facto combined with teaching. According to these historians, the difference is in part a reflection of the contemporary German polemics, and later historiography has been influenced by these allegations. See Anderson, *European Universities*, pp. 63–64 and Gert Schubring, ‘Spezienschulmodell versus Universitätsmodell: Die Institutionalisierung von Forschung’, in *‘Einsamkeit und Freiheit’ neu besichtigt: Universitätsreformen und Disziplinenbildung in Preussen als Modell für Wissenschaftspolitik im Europa des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Gert Schubring (Stuttgart, 1991), pp. 288–96.

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.<sup>7</sup>

In Prussia, by contrast, the university as an idea and an institution was headed for a renaissance. Already during 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.<sup>8</sup> In the medieval university the philosophical faculty was the lowest in rank, intended primarily for preparatory studies. 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. In *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (1798) Kant spoke of a conflict between, on the one hand, the faculty of philosophy and, on the other, the faculties of theology, law, and medicine. In defiance of then-prevalent ideas, Kant argued that the faculty of philosophy was superior because it was independent of demands for utility and free from links to the state. It relied exclusively on reason, and consequently it could 'lay claim to any teaching, in order to test its truth'. Only if the faculty of philosophy was given a higher and more independent position would it be possible for scientific thinking to develop.<sup>9</sup>

---

7 Charle, 'Patterns', pp. 33–47, and, more generally, Schubring, 'Spezialschulmodell'.

8 Charle, 'Patterns', pp. 47–48; Roy Steven Turner, 'University Reforms and Professorial Scholarship in Germany 1760–1806', in *The University in Society: Europe, Scotland, and the United States from the 16th to the 20th Century*, ed. by Lawrence Stone (Princeton, 1974).

9 Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. by Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln and London, 1992), p. 45. For a background to Kant's text, see Riccardo Pozzo, 'Kant's *Streit der Fakultäten* and Conditions at Königsberg', *History of Universities*, 16 (2000).

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, not seldom defensively directed by men such as Karl vom und zum Stein and Karl August von Hardenberg. 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.<sup>10</sup>

It is impossible to separate the founding of the Berlin university in 1810 from this political and social context.<sup>11</sup> In 1789 there were

---

10 Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte*, pp. 11–101; Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte: Vom Feudalismus des Alten Reiches bis zur defensiven Modernisierung der Reformära 1700–1815* (Munich, 1987), pp. 363–485; David Blackbourn, *History of Germany, 1780–1918: The Long Nineteenth Century* (Malden, 2003), pp. 54–68.

11 A still valuable depiction of the creation and early days of the Berlin university is a work published by Max Lenz in connection with its centenary in 1910, *Geschichte der Königlichen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin*, 4 vols (Halle, 1910–1918) (the final volume was delayed because of the First World War and was published eight years after the first volume). In preparation for the bicentenary of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in 2010, a new history was written. The six volumes of this history, which were published in 2010–2012 under the joint title *Geschichte der Universität*

thirty-five universities in the German region, almost half of whose students were registered at one of 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'.<sup>12</sup> 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,

---

*Unter den Linden*, had Heinz-Elmar Tenorth as their main editor. The first three volumes are in the form of a biography of the university and deal mainly with the general transformation of the university in the various German social systems, and they include topics such as financing, statutes, recruitment of professors, student life, relations with the city of Berlin and with the political authorities. See, in order, *Gründung und Blütezeit der Universität zu Berlin 1810–1918*, ed. by Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (Berlin, 2012); *Die Berliner Universität zwischen den Weltkriegen 1918–1945*, ed. by Heinz-Elmar Tenorth & Michael Grüttner (Berlin, 2012); and *Sozialistisches Experiment und Erneuerung in der Demokratie – die Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 1945–2010*, ed. by Konrad H. Jarausch, Matthias Middell & Annette Vogt (Berlin, 2012). The final three volumes deal with the history of the disciplines and scholarly scientific practices: *Genese der Disziplinen: Die Konstitution der Universität*, ed. by Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (Berlin, 2010), *Transformation der Wissensordnung*, ed. by Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (Berlin, 2010), and *Selbstbehauptung einer Vision*, ed. by Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (Berlin, 2010).

- 12 Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, 'Eine Universität zu Berlin – Vorgeschichte und Einrichtung', in *Geschichte der Universität Unter den Linden: Gründung und Blütezeit*, pp. 10–16; Rüdiger vom Bruch, 'Die Gründung der Berliner Universität', in *Humboldt international*, ed. by Schwinges, pp. 58–59. According to the most detailed analysis – and in contradistinction to what, for instance, vom Bruch claims – the King's words appear to be authentic; see Hans Ch. Kraus's study of Theodor von Schmalz, the first Vice-Chancellor of the Berlin university (1810–1811), *Theodor Anton Heinrich Schmalz (1760–1831): Jurisprudenz, Universitätspolitik und Publizistik im Spannungsfeld von Revolution und Restauration* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), pp. 97–104.

were established in Prussia at the same time, in Breslau in 1811 and in Bonn in 1818, does not weaken this impression.<sup>13</sup>

The Berlin university 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; the contributions of Kant, Fichte, and Schleiermacher regarding the status of the faculty of philosophy was a part of this discussion, which was far more comprehensive than that. Jena in Thuringia was one important centre of this exchange of opinions. The city's university had been established as far back as the mid-sixteenth century, but towards the end of the eighteenth century it developed into a rare academic free zone. During one period, in particular during the 1790s, the city numbered many of the most prominent thinkers among its professors, among them Schiller, Fichte, 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 shorter or longer stays: Goethe, Hölderlin, Novalis, Schleiermacher, Caroline Schlegel, and Dorothea Veit. 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.<sup>14</sup>

There are scholars who have claimed that the Berlin university was an 'institutionalisation of the ideal of Jena'.<sup>15</sup> To some extent

---

13 Charles E. McClelland, *State, Society, and University in Germany, 1700–1914* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 102–08; Schubring, 'Spezialschulmodell', pp. 288–96.

14 *Die Universität Jena: Tradition und Innovation um 1800*, ed. by Gerhard Müller, Klaus Ries, & Paul Ziche (Stuttgart, 2001); Karlsohn, *Originalitetens former*, pp. 82–99. *Bildung* (education, self-cultivation, character formation) is notoriously difficult to translate into English; see below, pp. 36–40 for a discussion on the meaning of this concept.

15 Theodore Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and Its Institutions* (Princeton, 1990), p. 286. As Thorsten Nybom has framed it, Cardinal John Henry Newman, the other great nineteenth-century ideologue of the university, used an existing institution (Oxford) as a model when writing his *The Idea of a University*, while Humboldt brought together a number of existing ideas and let them coalesce in a new institution, the Berlin university. See Thorsten Nybom, 'A Rule-Governed Community of Scholars: The Humboldt Vision in the History of the European University', in *University Dynamics and European Integration*, ed. by Peter A. M. Maassen & Johan P. Olsen (Dordrecht, 2007), p. 79. For general information on Newman, see Rothblatt, *The Modern University*, and Karlsohn, *Originalitetens former*, pp. 111–26.

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.<sup>16</sup> In the majority of these outlines for a reformation of higher education, the negatively charged appellation ‘university’ was shunned in favour of ‘institution of higher education’ or ‘educational institution’.<sup>17</sup> One noteworthy exception was Schleiermacher’s *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten in deutschem Sinn* (1808), which was the most important and widely distributed published work. Inspired by the romantic circles in Jena, he drew up guidelines for a new kind of university. Later interpreters – the best-known being Helmut Schelsky – have questioned Schleiermacher’s contribution, because he was not as willing as, for example, Fichte to break with the old order and safeguard the high value of science and scholarship. Today, however, his contribution as an intellectual pioneer for a new concept of the university is emphasised, not least because he contributed to spreading ideas and making them familiar in wider circles.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, Schleiermacher asked a very concrete question in his *Gelegentliche Gedanken*: ‘But why in Berlin of all places?’ He believed

---

16 Among the most significant early nineteenth-century texts about the university or higher education are Friedrich von Schelling, *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums* (Tübingen, 1803), Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Deduzierter Plan einer zu Berlin zu errichtenden höhern Lehranstalt, die in gehöriger Verbindung mit einer Akademie der Wissenschaften stehe* (1807; published in Tübingen in 1817), Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten in deutschem Sinn* (Berlin, 1808), and Heinrich Steffens, *Ueber die Idee von Universitäten* (Berlin, 1809). These writings were later republished in, among other places, *Die Idee*, ed. by Anrich, and *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten*, ed. by Ernst Müller (Leipzig, 1990). See also Tenorth, ‘Genese der Disziplinen’, pp. 9–10.

17 Vom Bruch, ‘Die Gründung’, pp. 57–62; Tenorth, ‘Eine Universität zu Berlin’, pp. 25–33.

18 Compare Helmut Schelsky, *Einsamkeit und Freiheit*, with Hedwig Kopetz, *Forschung und Lehre: Die Idee der Universität bei Humboldt, Jaspers, Schelsky und Mittelstrass* (Wien, 2002); Rüegg, ‘Themes’; and Christoph Markschies, *Was von Humboldt noch zu lernen ist: Aus Anlass des zweihundertjährigen Geburtstags der preussischen Reformuniversität* (Berlin, 2010).

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. Berlin 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.<sup>19</sup>

The following year, in July 1809, the Prussian king Frederick William III received an official letter with a similar content. In it the author, who had obviously been influenced by Schleiermacher, argued that a general institution of higher education should be established. An important argument for locating it in Berlin was the existence of institutes, collections, and academies in the city, and the fact that full justice would not be done to these if they were not linked to the scholarly teaching at the new university. The idea was that all units would keep their independence but that they would at the same time be deeply interdependent. 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.<sup>20</sup>

Baron (*Freiherr*) Friedrich Wilhelm Christian Karl Ferdinand von Humboldt was born in Potsdam on 22 June 1767 as the eldest son of chamberlain Alexander Georg von Humboldt and his wife, Marie-Elisabeth Colomb. 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, provided by prominent governors and private tutors. 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

---

19 Vom Bruch, 'Die Gründung', p. 59; Tenorth, 'Eine Universität zu Berlin', pp. 25–33. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, universities were not usually located in political and commercial centres. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century a number of new big city universities were established, for instance in London, Manchester, Zürich, Brussels, Athens, Kiev, and Madrid. Consequently, the founding of the Berlin university was part of a general change. See *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. by de Ridder-Symoens, and *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. by Rüegg.

20 Vom Bruch, 'Die Gründung', p. 60.

on him. After studying for four terms he went on a peregrination in Western Europe, experienced revolutionary sentiments in Paris, got engaged to Karoline von Dacheröden, and came into contact with Schiller, Goethe, and Herder, 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, 1794–97, he lived in Jena and was able to cultivate his philosophical and philological interests in the company of Schiller, Fichte, and the Schlegel brothers. Next followed a longer sojourn in Romance Europe, mainly with Paris as his base but including several longer journeys to Spain and other countries. Following a brief interlude in Berlin, Humboldt functioned as a Prussian diplomat at the Holy See in 1802–08. This was in many ways the richest period of his life, as he and his wife could enjoy ancient relics and socialise with artists on a daily basis.

Humboldt was, however, recalled to the Prussian capital and employed in Stein's reform cabinet. During sixteen productive months, from February 1809 to June 1810, he would leave a deep impression on the educational system.<sup>21</sup>

---

21 Literature about Wilhelm von Humboldt has been published for more than 150 years. The first comprehensive biographical contributions were Gustav Schlesier, *Erinnerungen an Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Stuttgart, 1843–1845) – divided into three publications, *Von 1767 bis 1794* (1843), *Von 1794 bis 1798* (1843), and *Von 1798 bis 1819* (1845) – and Rudolf Haym, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Lebensbild und Charakteristik* (Berlin, 1856). Among modern biographies the two volumes by Paul R. Sweet, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: A Biography: 1767–1808* (Columbus, OH, 1978) and *Wilhelm von Humboldt: A Biography: 1808–1835* (Columbus, OH, 1980), are in a class by themselves by virtue of their thoroughness and erudition. Herbert Scuria, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Werden und Wirken* (Berlin, 1970) is also a sterling biography, which is only slightly marred by the ideological jargon of Eastern European Marxism. In Lothar Gall's *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Ein Preuße in der Welt* (Berlin, 2011), the most recent addition to the major biographies, the phases of the protagonist's life are pursued in their chronological order, with a focus on his achievements as a politician and diplomat. The main features of Humboldt's life also emerge in Eberhard Kessel, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Idee und Wirklichkeit* (Stuttgart, 1967), Peter Berglar, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Reinbek, 1970), Tilman Borsche, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Munich, 1990), Manfred Geier, *Die Brüder Humboldt* (Reinbek, 2009), and Franz-Michael Konrad, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Göttingen, 2010), as they do in a concentrated form in biographical dictionaries such as Gerhard Masur & Hans Arens, 'Humboldt, Wilhelm von', in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (Berlin, 1953–), vol. X (1974) and Andreas Flitner,



4 Wilhelm von Humboldt

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* (secondary school) to the university. In the summer of 1809, he therefore sent the previously 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 not until six years later were there any statutes to speak of. When Georg-August-Universität opened its doors in Göttingen in 1737, it had done so to the accompaniment of an extravagant opening ceremony. In Berlin, which was marked by defeat and years of famine, the opening took place without any pomp and circumstance.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, the new university soon won academic renown, largely owing to the fact that Humboldt managed to persuade so

---

'Humboldt, Wilhelm von', in *Deutsche biographische Enzyklopädie*, ed. by Rudolf Vierhaus, 2nd rev. and enl. edn, 10 vols (Munich, 2005–2008), vol. v (2006). Several older works that are still referred to in studies contribute to the image of Humboldt without being actual biographies: Eduard Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee* (Berlin, 1909); Siegfried A. Kaehler, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und der Staat: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte deutscher Lebensgestaltung um 1800* (Munich, 1927); and Clemens Menze, *Die Bildungsreform Wilhelm von Humboldts* (Hanover, 1975). For Humboldt as a linguist, see James Turner, *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton, 2014), pp. 134–36. In spite of its size, the literature about Wilhelm von Humboldt can never match that devoted to his younger brother. In a fascinating metabiography of Alexander von Humboldt's many biographies, Nicolaas A. Rupke claims that there are more than 5,000 written works about the great natural scientist, many with a biographical slant. Rupke distinguishes the many faces of Alexander von Humboldt as they have appeared during different periods: the liberal democrat of the decades prior to 1871, the *Kultur*-chauvinist of Wilhelmian Germany and the Weimar Republic, the superhuman Aryan of the Third Reich, the radical abolitionist of East Germany, the cosmopolitan philo-Semite of West Germany, and the globalisation pioneer of today. See Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography* (Chicago, 2008).

22 Tenorth, 'Eine Universität zu Berlin', pp. 3–75; Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, 'Geschichte der Universität zu Berlin, 1810–2010: Zur Einleitung', in *Geschichte der Universität Unter den Linden: Gründung und Blütezeit*, ed. by Tenorth, pp. xxvi and xxxvii; vom Bruch, 'Die Gründung', pp. 53–54.

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 – *Rektor* – of the university for a brief period), and was succeeded in 1818 by Hegel. Schleiermacher became the first professor in theology, Carl von Savigny in law, Carl Ritter in geography, August Boeckh in classical philology, and Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland in medicine. 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. However, beginning in the 1820s his brother Alexander endeavoured to ensure that the natural sciences had a firm foothold in the capital.<sup>23</sup>

The new Berlin university was thus not the work of a moment. On the contrary, it was predicated on the slow reform process during the eighteenth century, the intense intellectual debate in the decades around the year 1800, and the political reaction to the defeat of Prussia.<sup>24</sup> From all of this, a new university system was born. For a long time, it was more of an idea than a reality. It is this idea which will henceforth be at the centre of the present study.

### Humboldt's idea

During his entire life Wilhelm von Humboldt was an intellectually active man, but his interests gradually changed over time. His first writings, completed when he was around twenty-five years old, were political texts in a liberal spirit, heavily influenced by the French Revolution. Around the year 1800, Humboldt immersed himself in Greek antiquity and made his first attempts to formulate a theory

---

23 It may be superfluous to point out that the recruitment of professors for the Berlin university was not simply a matter of finding the best minds; sex, religion, and denominational or ideological persuasion disqualified many potential candidates. In addition, the majority of the professors were not particularly famous and were soon forgotten. See Werner Teß, 'Professoren – Der Lehrkörper und seine Praxis zwischen Wissenschaft, Politik und Gesellschaft', in *Geschichte der Universität Unter den Linden: Gründung und Blütezeit*, ed. by Tenorth. For von Ranke's famous *Übungen*, which were not regular seminars, see Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, 'Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn: Location and Evidence in Modern Historiography', *Modern Intellectual History*, 5:3 (2008), 427.

24 See also the discussion in Wittrock, 'Modern University', pp. 315–16.

of education. Next came the years 1809–10, when in a number of documents he discussed the Prussian educational system, both concretely and in principle. During the final twenty-five years of his life he initially wrote memoranda and tracts dealing with constitutional policy, but soon concentrated on comparative linguistics. If, in spite of this versatility, a comprehensive idea, his *Lebensthema*, is to be found, it would have to be human beings and their education.<sup>25</sup>

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. It has to do with ‘image’ (*Bild*), ‘depiction’ (*Abbildung*), and many other derivations. 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

---

25 Wilhelm von Humboldt’s works were initially published in seven volumes by Carl Brandes, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin, 1841–1852). The Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften published the more complete *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1903–1936) in seventeen volumes, with Albert Leitzmann and Bruno Gebhardt as editors. This edition was republished in 1967–1968. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel were the editors of *Werke in fünf Bänden* (Darmstadt, 1960–1981), which contained a detailed critical commentary. The Flitner-Giel edition is the one used for the present study. In 2010 these five volumes were republished in a *Studienausgabe*.

as *éducation*, *formation* or *self-cultivation* do not quite capture the German meaning.<sup>26</sup>

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*.<sup>27</sup> Traces of this way of thinking can, for instance, be found 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. Ultimately this had to do with realising what he called *Humanität*. In this way, the educational concept of *Bildung* became a somewhat secularised further development of an older idea. Many of the great figures of the day – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich von

---

26 The pedagogical, philosophical, and historical literature on the concept of *Bildung* is overwhelmingly large. Basic examinations of the history of the concept can be found in Rudolf Vierhaus, 'Bildung', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, & Reinhart Koselleck, 8 vols (Stuttgart, 1972–1997), vol. I (1972), and Ernst Lichtenstein, 'Bildung', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. by Joachim Ritter, 13 vols (Basel and Stuttgart, 1971–2007), vol. I (1971). A meandering survey of the history of the concept is provided by Reinhart Koselleck in 'Einleitung – Zur anthropologischen und semantischen Struktur der Bildung', in *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Werner Conze and Jürgen Kocka (Stuttgart, 1985–), vol. II: *Bildungsgüter und Bildungswissen*, ed. by Reinhart Koselleck (1990), a volume that in addition contains a number of essays on the significance of the concept of *Bildung* to the nineteenth-century middle classes. See also Ulrich Engelhardt, *'Bildungsbürgertum': Begriffs- und Dogmengeschichte eines Etiketts* (Stuttgart, 1986), Aleida Assmann, *Arbeit am nationalen Gedächtnis: Eine kurze Geschichte der deutschen Bildungsidee* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), and Georg Bollenbeck, *Bildung und Kultur: Glanz und Elend eines deutschen Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994).

27 Vierhaus, 'Bildung'; Lichtenstein, 'Bildung'. The classic work on the concept of education in antiquity is Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: Die Formung des griechischen Menschen*, 3 vols (Berlin, 1934–1947).

Schiller, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Immanuel Kant – referred to Herder and contributed to the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century dynamic discussion about *Bildung*.<sup>28</sup>

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. In this dynamics, Humboldt imagined that that which is individual could approach that which is generally human.<sup>29</sup>

One prerequisite for Humboldt's idea of the university was the transformation of the concept of originality that occurred in his time. To Kant, originality was still a capacity that belonged to an exceptional natural talent; but around 1800, creativity more and more often began to be seen as a universal quality that everyone potentially possessed. When originality was not exclusively reserved for artistic geniuses, it could become a lodestar for an entire social institution. Humboldt transferred this way of thinking to the arena of the university. He argued not only for the importance of research, but also for the idea that teaching should be characterised by active dialogic creation that included both students and teachers.

---

28 Koselleck, 'Struktur der Bildung'; Karlsohn, *Originalitetens former*.

29 Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Theorie der Bildung des Menschen: Bruchstücke', in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. by Flitner & Giel, vol. 1: *Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte* (1960). The literature on Wilhelm von Humboldt's concept of *Bildung* is extensive. See Dietrich Benner, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Bildungstheorie: Eine problemgeschichtliche Studie zum Begründungszusammenhang neuzeitlicher Bildungsreform* (Weinheim and Munich, 2003), pp. 7–10, where the author discusses influential but reciprocally dissimilar understandings of Humboldt's concept of *Bildung*, represented by men like Eduard Spranger, Theodor Litt, and Clemens Menze.

Emulation – not imitation – was to be characteristic of the new pedagogics.<sup>30</sup>

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 an official document from 1809, ‘Der Königsberger und der Litauische Schulplan’, he outlined an educational system that would provide its pupils with what he called *Menschenbildung*. The teaching would not focus on detailed exercises or future professional activities. Instead, 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, first and foremost Greek, held an obvious special position for him.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, another document from the same year, regarding guidelines for the examination of Prussian administrators, shows that Humboldt’s vision of *Bildung* was not narrowly limited to the world of the school. He did not feel that it was essential that future government officials be able to account for statistics or individual facts. Rather, it was the intellectual vitality of the officials and their general ideas about humanity that determined how capable they were. Thus it was qualities and character traits such as these that should be assessed before an individual was allowed to begin to serve the state.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, the idea of *Bildung* held a central position in Humboldt’s educational philosophy, both in more general discussions and in concrete plans for the transformation of the school system. The ideal of *Bildung* 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

---

30 Karlsohn, *Originalitetens former*, pp. 24–30 and 154–58; Thomas Karlsohn, ‘On Humboldtian and Contemporary Notions of the Academic Lecture’, in *The Humboldtian Tradition*, ed. by Josephson, Karlsohn, & Östling.

31 Wilhelm von Humboldt, ‘Der Königsberger und der Litauische Schulplan’, in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. by Flitner & Giel, vol. IV: *Schriften zur Politik und zum Bildungswesen* (1964).

32 Wilhelm von Humboldt, ‘Gutachten über die Organisation der Ober-Examinations-Kommission’, in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. by Flitner & Giel, vol. IV: *Schriften zur Politik und zum Bildungswesen* (1964).

at the end of 1809 or during 1810, many of the basic ideas that later came to be invoked in the Humboldtian tradition can be found.<sup>33</sup>

Next to *Bildung*, the idea of science and scholarship (*Wissenschaft*) was a cornerstone in Humboldt's conception of the university.<sup>34</sup> 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 idea of pure science and scholarship, their dominant principles must be freedom and seclusion (*Einsamkeit*; in this study, that word is normally translated as "solitude")'. In contrast to schools, which provide fixed and finished knowledge, science/scholarship should be seen as 'an as yet unsolved problem

---

33 Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin', in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. by Flitner & Giel, vol IV: *Schriften zur Politik und zum Bildungswesen* (1964). I henceforth quote from Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'University Reform in Germany, I: On the Spirit and the Organisational Framework of Intellectual Institutions in Berlin', trans. by Edward Shils, *Minerva*, 8:2 (1970), 242–50. The different suggestions – presented by Adolf von Harnack, Eduard Spranger, Bruno Gebhardt, and others – on how this text is to be dated are discussed in Ulrich Herrmann, Markus Bok, & Günter Erdmann, 'Kommentare und Anmerkungen: Band IV', in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. by Flitner & Giel, vol. V: *Kleine Schriften, Autobiographisches, Dichtungen, Briefe, Kommentare und Anmerkungen zu Band I–V, Anhang* (1981), pp. 556–57, without there being a final established conclusion. See also Tenorth, 'Eine Universität zu Berlin', pp. 16–26.

34 In German linguistic usage, *Wissenschaft* denotes both the human and the natural sciences. In the present study, the word *Wissenschaft* is usually translated as 'science and scholarship'. See Ringer, *The Decline*, pp. 102–04; Helmut Pulte, 'Wissenschaft', in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. by Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer & Gottfried Gabriel, 13 vols (Basel and Stuttgart, 1971–2007), vol. XII (2004); and Lorraine Daston & Glenn W. Most, 'History of Science and History of Philologies', *Isis*, 106:2 (2015). In *Acolytes of Nature: Defining Natural Science in Germany 1770–1850* (Chicago, 2012), Denise Philipps has, however, established a multi-layered pre-history. Above all, she argues for the idea that the concept of *Naturwissenschaft* (natural science) had a complicated origin and that it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the modern sense of the term stabilised.

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.<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup>

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. This second reason is, according to Humboldt, justified by the fact that the university

---

35 Humboldt, 'On the Spirit', 243–45. Humboldt, 'Über die innere und äussere Organisation', vol. IV, p. 257. Shils translates this passage as 'closed bodies of permanently settled truths' (Humboldt, 'On the Spirit', 244).

36 Ibid., 246–47.

is also an educational institution entrusted with the task of training good officials.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, Humboldt recommended a kind of governmental border control for those who wished to gain access to the university. However, he also felt that the freedom in lecture halls and seminars should be unconditional. This aspect of academic freedom has subsequently come, in some respects, to be expressed in the formula *Lern- und Lehrfreiheit*, a conceptual pair that did not appear in Humboldt's own writings though these concepts have come to form part of the classic German university tradition.<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting that the Prussian official's view of governmental authority differed from the liberal ideas he had previously formulated in *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen* (1792). In this composition from his youth, he had defended the self-fulfilment of the individual and warned against the unrestricted power of the state.<sup>39</sup>

---

37 Ibid., 249. Humboldt's view on the relationship between the state and the university is discussed in Ursula Krautkrämer, *Staat und Erziehung: Begründung öffentlicher Erziehung bei Humboldt, Kant, Fichte, Hegel und Schleiermacher* (Munich, 1979), pp. 29–77, and Peter Josephson, *Den akademiska frihetens gränser: Max Weber, Humboldtmodellerna och den värdefria vetenskapen* (Uppsala, 2005), pp. 51–59. For the earlier history of academic freedom, see Bo Lindberg, 'Akademisk frihet före moderniteten', *Lychnos*, 2014.

38 Josephson, *Den akademiska frihetens gränser*, pp. 57–59. A search of the Deutsches Textarchiv, hosted by Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, indicates that the first instance of 'Lehrfreiheit' can be found in Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann, *Die Politik, auf den Grund und das Maaß der gegebenen Zustände zurückgeführt* (Göttingen, 1835), p. 290, and of 'Lernfreiheit' in Adolph Diesterweg, *Über das Verderben auf den deutschen Universitäten* (Essen, 1836), p. 12. See <http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de> (accessed 15 February 2016).

39 Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen', in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. by Flitner & Giel, vol. I: *Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte* (1960). The text was written in 1792 but was not published until 1851. Three years later it was published in an English translation with the title *The Sphere and Duties of Government*, and it soon came to exert an influence on the political and philosophical debate. John Stuart Mill used a quotation from Humboldt's text as his motto for *On Liberty* (1859). See John Roberts, *Wilhelm von Humboldt and German Liberalism: A Reassessment* (Oakville, 2009).

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.<sup>40</sup>

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. Björn Wittrock has called it ‘perhaps the most discussed document in the modern history of universities’.<sup>41</sup> 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*. At the same time, 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.<sup>42</sup>

The development of the Berlin university 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

---

40 Humboldt, ‘On the Spirit’, 247–48.

41 Wittrock, ‘Modern University’, p. 317.

42 Sweet, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, II: 1808–1835, pp. 473–91; Scuria, Wilhelm von Humboldt, pp. 608–09.

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.<sup>43</sup>

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 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 – what Roy Steven Turner has called ‘the research imperative’ – 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.<sup>44</sup>

McClelland for his part maintains that the conditions in which the Berlin university operated were completely different at the beginning in comparison to at the end of the nineteenth century. The university

---

43 Menze, *Bildungsreform*; Fritz Ringer, ‘*Bildung* and Its Implications in the German Tradition, 1890–1933’, in Fritz Ringer, *Toward A Social History of Knowledge: Collected Essays* (New York, 2000); Sven Haase, *Berliner Universität und Nationalgedanke 1800–1848: Genese einer politischen Idee* (Stuttgart, 2012). See also Sven-Eric Liedman, *Karl Marx: En biografi* (Stockholm, 2015), pp. 70–81.

44 Tenorth, ‘Eine Universität zu Berlin’, pp. 68–70; Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, ‘Verfassung und Ordnung der Universität’, in *Geschichte der Universität Unter den Linden: Gründung und Blütezeit*, ed. by Tenorth, p. 112. See also Roy Steven Turner, ‘The Prussian Universities and the Research Imperative, 1806–1848’, unpublished doctoral thesis (Princeton, 1972).

was born from a defeat, and for a long time it only had 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.<sup>45</sup>

It is, however, possible 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 is the essential factor. ‘The construction of the image of Humboldt and its reception, transmission, and deformation have their own history’, Tenorth points out. And it is with the investigation of this history that the present study is associated.<sup>46</sup>

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, but she has been supported by historians such as Mitchell G. Ash, Rüdiger vom Bruch, Dieter Langewiesche, Marc Schalenberg, and Walter Rüegg. 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 Berlin university. Other people too, famous in their own time but since forgotten,

---

45 Charles E. McClelland, ‘Die Universität am Ende ihres ersten Jahrhunderts – Mythos Humboldt?’, in *Geschichte der Universität Unter den Linden: Gründung und Blütezeit*, ed. by Tenorth, pp. 638–53. Among other things, McClelland bases his conclusions on his own research, not least McClelland, *State* and Charles E. McClelland, *The German Experience of Professionalization: Modern Learned Professions and Their Organizations from the Early Nineteenth Century to the Hitler Era* (Cambridge, 1991).

46 Tenorth, ‘Geschichte der Universität zu Berlin’, p. xliii.

featured in depictions of the early nineteenth-century university. Wilhelm von Humboldt's name was rarely, if ever, mentioned.<sup>47</sup>

According to this line of research, the Berlin university 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. Like other innovative or reformed universities it was financed with government funds, though Humboldt himself had argued for a more traditional economic foundation (demesne and prebend) in order to safeguard a certain measure of independence from the state.<sup>48</sup>

Nor did the Berlin university 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. Rather, the birth of the modern university was located in the Göttingen and Halle of Enlightenment rationalism. In written histories, the widespread death of universities and the sweeping changes in the administrative structures of the early nineteenth century were accentuated, as was the incipient academic liberalism and the emergence of student associations. In none of these contexts was the creation of the Berlin university given a paradigmatic significance. It was mentioned in passing, often in the same breath as the newly established universities in Bonn (1818) and Munich (1826).<sup>49</sup>

---

47 See Chapter 1 for references to this research. During the nineteenth century attention was paid to Wilhelm von Humboldt not only as a diplomat, a statesman, and a linguist but also, among other things, as a philosopher of history. In his influential *Grundriß der Historik* (Leipzig, 1868), Johann Gustav Droysen paid homage to him as 'a Bacon for the historical sciences' (p. 6). For Humboldt's ideas about history, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 167–213.

48 Paletschek, 'Verbreitete sich', pp. 79–80.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98. Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität opened its doors in Munich in 1826 but had a long prehistory: in 1472–1800 its predecessor was located in Ingolstadt and in 1800–1826 in Landshut.

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. On the whole, there was agreement regarding the idea that the qualities that above all others distinguished the German university were academic freedom and theoretical-scholarly/scientific teaching. Occasionally the German New Humanist university tracts from the early 1800s were referred to, in particular Schleiermacher's; but the focal points of the debate were often concrete problems concerning examinations, forms of study, and the working conditions of the teachers.<sup>50</sup>

The bringing together of different disciplines was considered to be another distinguishing feature of the German universities; in contrast to the situation in France, all subjects were housed in one and the same university. This was nothing new in itself; indeed, from a historical perspective a strong vein of continuity can be seen to exist between this feature and the basic notions underpinning the medieval university. Kant, Fichte, and Schleiermacher do not seem to have had many followers either. Few argued for the idea that the faculty of philosophy should play a superior or unifying role in the nineteenth-century German university. In all essentials, as was pointed out above, 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. Before that time, the idea that the systematic production of new knowledge was an academic concern of the highest order was not a majority view.<sup>51</sup>

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 Berlin university is sometimes mentioned as a young and dynamic university, whose emergence and further expansion were put in relation to Prussia's defeat in the Napoleonic Wars and the ever-increasing importance of the Prussian capital. On the other hand, it did not have any immediate effect on the development of the German university system – neither in ideological nor in institutional terms. The ideals that had been formulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his writings around 1810

---

50 Ibid., pp. 98–100.

51 Ibid., pp. 96–98.

did not provide fruitful input in the discussion about the university, and it would be a long time before they materialised into a concrete organisation.

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.<sup>52</sup> In a major study, Marc Schalenberg 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, especially at the traditional universities. Besides, neither in the French nor in the British debate was Wilhelm von Humboldt referred to as a key inspirer.<sup>53</sup> Johns Hopkins University, founded in Baltimore in 1876, became the first American university that expressly endeavoured to unite academic education with scholarly/scientific research through, among other means, a special 'graduate school'. 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 dissemination of the new ideas. It should, however, be noted that it was the German

---

52 *Humboldt international*, ed. by Schwinges; Schalenberg, *Humboldt auf Reisen?*; Charle, 'Patterns'; Edward Shils & John Roberts, 'The Diffusion of European Models Outside Europe', in *A History of the University in Europe*, ed. by Rüegg; Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 2009), pp. 1132–47; Anja Werner, *The Transatlantic World of Higher Education: Americans at German Universities, 1776–1914* (Oxford, 2013).

53 Schalenberg, *Humboldt auf Reisen?* The British universities were part of global academic networks during this period, but these were often exclusively Anglo-Saxon and included Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. See Tamson Pietsch, *Empire of Scholars: Universities, Networks and the British Academic World 1850–1939* (Manchester, 2013).

university that was the model. Wilhelm von Humboldt was not mentioned.<sup>54</sup>

Seen in a broader perspective, the last decades of the nineteenth century were a period of transformation for the major university systems. The scholarly/scientific world became ever more professionalised, specialised, and research-orientated, while at the same time competition among countries intensified.<sup>55</sup> In the turn-of-the-century German Empire, which was in many ways the driving force in this development, the conflicts between different interests and scholarly/scientific ideals intensified. This was where Wilhelm von Humboldt, almost a century after leaving his post in the Prussian ministry of the interior, ended up at the centre of the debate about the idea of the university for the first time.

---

54 Roy Steven Turner, 'Humboldt in North America? Reflections on the Research University and Its Historians' in *Humboldt international*, ed. by Schwinges; Roger L. Geiger, *To Advance Knowledge: The Growth of American Research Universities, 1900–1940* (New York, 1986), pp. 7–9. Abraham Flexner, a prominent American university reformer at the beginning of the twentieth century and originally a student at Johns Hopkins University, praised the spread of the German academic model to the USA in *Universities: American, German, English* (Oxford, 1930). Eventually Clark Kerr would maintain that Flexner had probably been 'too respectful of the German university' and not realised its limitations. See Clark Kerr, 'Remembering Flexner', in Abraham Flexner, *Universities: American, German, English* (London, 1968), p. xvii. Examples of the American reception of the German university model since the nineteenth century are provided by Gry Cathrin Brandser in *Humboldt Revisited: The Institutional Drama of Academic Identity* (Bergen, 2006).

55 Wittrock, 'Modern University', pp. 319–31; Anderson, *European Universities*.