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Utopian Visions of Mexican Grandeur Rooted in Natural Abundance: Dreams Inspired by Alexander von Humboldt’s *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*

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INTRODUCTION

Alexander von Humboldt’s *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1811), which provided an encyclopedic examination of Mexico, was a holistic study. It examined history, geography, climate, culture, customs, society, economic sectors, finances, politics, and national defense. Unsurprisingly, the study’s impact was diverse and wide-ranging. During the early national era (1820s-1850s) it influenced government policies, science, cartography, and more. This paper focuses on one aspect of Humboldt’s study: economy. While this focus is narrow, the topic was an important one for Humboldt. One scholar acknowledged this, labeling *Political Essay* an “economic manual.” Furthermore, Humboldt stated that his study (which holistically linked different subjects such as climate, geography, economy, politics, and society) was particularly interested in examining the physical environment from the perspective of economy and commercial opportunities.

Another reason for focusing on Humboldt’s economic vision is that it had a tremendous impact. When one thinks of individuals who articulated economic visions that were very influential in independent Latin America a number of names come to mind, such as Adam Smith, Jean Baptiste Say, Karl Marx, Andre Gunder Frank, Frederick von Hayek, and Milton Friedman. A candidate for the most prominent is certainly Raúl Prebisch, the leader of ECLA who championed state-directed industrialization. Prebisch not only shaped Latin American industrial visions, but also influenced government policies to realize his industrial utopia. His influence was greatest around the mid-20th century. Humboldt’s economic vision was influential over a century before Prebisch’s, at the onset of Latin American independence. Humboldt was perhaps nearly as influential as Prebisch. True, Humboldt’s *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* was more limited in geographic scope in the sense that it focused on Mexico as opposed to all of Latin America. But both authors’ works were influential in different corners of the globe. Prebisch’s influence was mostly in Latin America (but also in other parts of the “Third World”),
and Humboldt’s *Political Essay* was influential in Mexico, the United States, Europe, and parts of Latin America.

Claiming that Humboldt’s account of the Mexican economy in *Political Essay* was very influential is nothing new. In fact, asserting that it had a tremendous impact and turning it into a scapegoat for Mexico’s woes became commonplace. After independence Mexico experienced several decades of difficulty. Mexico’s early national era was characterized by political instability, economic underachievement, militarism, foreign invasions, and significant territorial loss. Starting in the late 19th century, it became fashionable to blame Mexico’s early-national-era dilemmas on Humboldt’s *Political Essay*. The narrative went this way: Foreigners invaded to steal the natural wealth advertised in *Political Essay*, and Mexico was unprepared to defend itself owing to the overconfidence its leaders had in national greatness owing to Humboldt’s depiction of Mexican grandeur. Twentieth-century scholars built on this analysis, blaming Humboldt for an inflated and erroneous sense of Mexican wealth in the decades after independence, a false perception that partly explained Mexico’s failures and foreign aggression. Thus, later generations transformed Humboldt’s utopian vision of Mexican grandeur rooted in natural riches into a dystopia.

However fascinating these shifting attitudes about Humboldt may be, I want to emphasize something else that this story reveals. Namely, that there is a consensus that Humboldt’s *Political Essay* had a tremendous impact in the decades after Mexico became independent. This begs a question: what accounted for its significant influence on nationals’ and foreigners’ economic imaginings of Mexico in the early national era? While some Mexican thinkers have commented briefly on this subject, to my knowledge, no in-depth investigation has been done. The tendency has been to assert Humboldt had an impact rather than provide a detailed explanation of what accounted for it. This paper is my first attempt at an explanation. My argument is that a number of factors explain the great influence of *Political Essay*. One is the historical timing and historical context, namely, the era of independence/early nationhood. Another is Humboldt’s own stature and political connections. Finally, and perhaps most importantly: the content of the text. It is this last factor—the text—that I will mostly focus on in this paper. I end the paper by briefly discussing reception of *Political Essay* to demonstrate its impact. Since my research on reception is incomplete my discussion is provisional.

By seeking to explain what accounted for Humboldt’s popularity and turning mostly to *Political Essay* for answers I follow a non-positivist trend in economic scholarship, albeit an uncommon one. (See, for example the work on economic rhetoric by Deidre McCloskey, and Robert Heilbronner’s concept of economic “visions.” For another work in this vein see Paul Gootenberg’s analysis of why Gerschenkron’s writings on development failed to take hold in Latin America.)

*POLITICAL ESSAY DURING INDEPENDENCE AND EARLY NATIONHOOD*
Undoubtedly, the era the text appeared partly explains its impact and influence. Owing to Mexican independence, foreign, especially European and American, interest in Mexico increased significantly. Spain’s power and influence finally ended, and other nations saw an opportunity to increase their presence. English and American politicians and adventurers residing in Mexico during the era of early nationhood noted the great interest in their homelands to learn about Mexico. In fact, something of a publishing boom (albeit a minor one) of British books (mostly published in London) about Mexico appeared in the 1820s. Joel Poinsett, an American diplomat in Mexico, wrote a text on his travels and explained he was partly inspired to publish it owing to the thirst for news about Mexico in his home country. At this time, there wasn’t much information about Mexico available to foreigners owing to Spain’s policy of restricting the dissemination of material.

Humboldt’s text filled this void. The numerous editions in different languages clearly indicate there was a large demand. The original French version appeared in 1811. The same year an English translation, published in London, appeared. Two Spanish translations appeared in the 1820s and a German edition was also published. A second French edition also appeared. Of the dozens of works Humboldt published, *Political Essay* was what he was best known for in Europe, which further illustrates the great global interest in Mexico and his book about it.

During the age of independence and early nationhood *Political Essay* also proved to be important to Mexican creoles, but for different reasons. Mexican intellectual Lucas Alamán asserted that Humboldt inspired Mexican independence, but I don’t think there is evidence to support that claim (see below for more on this). Rather, Humboldt seems to have been invoked to help forge a national identity for the fledgling nation. Politicians quoted and repeated Humboldt’s descriptions of Mexico as naturally rich and destined for economic greatness. Citing Humboldt enabled leaders to boast about a bright future.

**AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT**

The fact that Humboldt’s work was considered authoritative also explains its great influence. It is worth noting that scholars remain impressed with Humboldt’s analysis and data even today. Probably a number of factors explain why it was considered authoritative. One was the vast amount of data Humboldt compiled in the 4-volume work. Humboldt was given access to a large quantity of data that had already been collected in New Spain, which his study was largely based upon. Furthermore, he brought a large number of scientific instruments and collected additional data himself. The huge amount of statistics Humboldt utilized in the book undoubtedly impressed his readers. Another thing that made him appear like an expert was his wide knowledge of the existing scholarship on Mexico. The fact that he praised some of the studies about Mexico and criticized others perhaps enhanced his credentials. Finally, his own scientific method probably impressed his readers. (In fact, it started a methodology that scholars have labeled “Humboldtian science.”) To calculate Mexico’s natural wealth, Humboldt engaged
in a sophisticated analysis that considered the impact of a range of factors including resources, climate, altitude, temperature, geography, etc. Furthermore, he sometimes explained that he was forced to use a less desirable method to make his calculations owing to a shortage of data, an explicit discussion of method that demonstrated his expertise and knowledge of the available data. Nationals and foreigners frequently cited his results and tables, treating them as solid facts. Furthermore, even if contemporaries disagreed with some of his conclusions they still treated him as the top authority. A case in point is Poinsett, who critiqued Humboldt’s analysis of commerce but repeatedly gave very high praise to Political Essay and included much statistical information from it, data that were treated as accurate facts.

Humboldt’s great authority might have started something of a snowball effect, which increased his influence even more. In other words, some writers may have cited Humboldt as an authority to legitimize their own plans and projects. Tadeo Ortiz de Ayala, a Mexican academic and bureaucrat, perhaps provides an example of this phenomenon at work. Ortiz greatly praised Humboldt, and provided a blueprint for Mexican economic development that perfectly followed Humboldt’s prescriptions.

While one can find examples of writers citing Humboldt to support their economic designs well into the 20th century, it appears that the German’s authority waned in the second half of the 19th century. One reason was that newer studies appeared, which made Humboldt’s study outdated. For example, even though José Mora, the renowned Mexican liberal, praised Humboldt, he also sought to update Political Essay in some ways, explaining that conditions had changed in the decades since Humboldt had published his study. Similarly, in the second half of the 19th century the French were probably most influenced by the recent study of Mexico by the Frenchman Miguel Chevalier, not Humboldt’s work, which appeared about a half century earlier. Another explanation for Humboldt’s declining impact was not that things had changed since his work was published, but rather a more serious charge: Humboldt was wrong since he overestimated the extent of Mexico’s natural wealth. This critique, partly inspired by a notion of wealth that focused on technology rather than resources, can be dated back to the late 19th century.

WRITING FOR A GLOBAL AUDIENCE

As noted, Political Essay was widely disseminated in Mexico and abroad. One aforementioned explanation was that during the era in which it appeared there was great interest in Mexico. Another factor that might explain the text’s wide dissemination and influence is that Humboldt’s intended audience was dispersed around the globe. Humboldt wrote the book with more than one audience in mind, which perhaps explains why it appealed to diverse groups from different countries and hemispheres.
On the one hand, Humboldt was something of a nationalist making a case for favoring Mexican interests over Spanish interests. This is not to say that he promoted independence. Nevertheless, his reformist discourse probably resonated with creole nationals after independence. For example, Humboldt repeatedly complained about Spanish restrictions and regulations, claiming that they limited Mexico’s economic progress. He also charged that Spain’s focus on exporting Mexican silver benefitted the mother country but not the colony. Finally, he called for more focus on food production for local consumption rather than for export.

On the other hand, scholars have charged that Humboldt was something of an imperialist, a writer with a foreign perspective who sought to exploit Mexico economically. Pratt, discussing Humboldt’s works broadly rather than focusing on his work on Mexico, charged that Humboldt (and others) viewed Latin America with “imperial eyes.” Scholar Daniel Cosío Villegas, focusing specifically on Political Essay, charged that Humboldt’s writings were imperialist. There is something to this charge. Humboldt discussed global trade and global commodities (silver, cotton, sugar, which he termed “colonial products”) at great length. Further illustrating this focus on exports, at one point he stated that one of the advantages Mexico had over the US was lower labor costs in some export industries. (Often Humboldt spoke form a different perspective, complaining about low wages and poverty in Mexico.) Furthermore, according to one scholar, some of the global comparisons Humboldt made were written with a European audience in mind. Humboldt frequently compared wheat production in Mexico and other regions of the world (including Europe) since wheat was a commodity Europeans were very interested in. It is also clear that Humboldt was interested in sharing his findings with Americans, especially Jefferson. In 1804, he visited the USA directly after his trip to Mexico and shared his maps of Mexico with Jefferson. Humboldt sent Jefferson a copy of Political Essay when it appeared in print.

Even if Humboldt wrote for foreign audiences, he would not have agreed with the charge that he was an imperialist. Humboldt’s vision was a liberal and cosmopolitan one. He envisioned nationals and foreigners working together to develop Mexico economically. Freeing up trade restrictions would enable other foreign powers to engage in commercial relations with Mexico. Additionally, after Mexican independence Humboldt wrote letters of introduction for some foreigners who visited Mexico. Thus, in contrast to Prebisch’s nationalist vision, Humboldt’s was liberal, with nationals and foreigners working together in Mexico.

A COMPREHENSIVE DESCRIPTION OF MEXICO’S NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Humboldt provided a comprehensive description of Mexico to his global audience. This comprehensive examination was probably another reason for his text’s widespread appeal and popularity. Political Essay was encyclopedic—something of a reference book. Scholars still find it a useful source of information today. Since coverage was so broad, it appealed to readers with a diverse range of interests.
This broad coverage is somewhat surprising in light of some of the claims Humboldt made in Political Essay. At several points Humboldt argued that conventional wisdom about the basis of Mexico’s wealth, which emphasized the importance of Mexican silver, was wrong. Humboldt countered that agriculture was the true basis of Mexican wealth, owing not only to the fertility of the soil, but also because agriculture provided sustenance to the population. Developing this point, he dedicated an entire section of his book to production for local consumption.

So why did Humboldt provide comprehensive coverage rather than focus mostly on production for local consumption? Perhaps one explanation is Humboldt’s global audience, as noted above. Another explanation is perhaps Humboldt’s concept of wealth. Before explaining what it was, let me make clear what it was not. Despite the fact that Humboldt highlighted economy and cited the “economists” (such as A. Smith), his study was not a history of political economy or a work of economic theory. Rather, as noted, it was a holistic study of Mexico. Humboldt’s concept of wealth emerged out of this orientation. Scholar José Enrique Covarrubias has labeled Humboldt’s concept of wealth “natural.” The basis of wealth is the advantages provided by the natural environment. There is much more to this than simply a focus on natural resource endowment. Natural resources, climate, geography, altitude, topography, temperature, and location all figured into Humboldt’s calculations. This is not to say that non-physical factors did not matter for Humboldt (such as capital, technology, labor, and policy). They did. But for Humboldt the advantages afforded by nature were paramount, the essential building blocks that humans had to work with. (Not only modern scholars, but 19th century thinkers have observed that Humboldt stressed the natural environment. For example, in the late 19th century some thinkers noted that Humboldt’s environmental concept of wealth made him overlook the possibilities of developing Mexico’s northern frontier, a region he claimed was impossible to develop owing to the arid soil.) Humboldt’s natural concept of wealth led him to carry out a comprehensive study of the economic possibilities provided by Mexico’s natural environment, despite the fact that he perhaps preferred some branches of the economy to others.

HUMBOLDT’S ECONOMIC VISION FOR MEXICO

This leads us to arguably the most important factor that explains Humboldt’s widespread influence. Humboldt’s economic account of the advantages afforded by nature was not simply a collection of statistics and facts. Rather, it was a clear economic vision—a development blueprint. More importantly for our purposes, it was one that captured the imagination of Humboldt’s readers, for they constantly repeated parts of it. What made it so appealing? A couple of things seem paramount. One is that it was very optimistic: owing to Mexico’s natural advantages the country was destined for grandeur. While Mexico was currently rich, future possibilities were almost limitless, for a number of obstacles—political, environmental, geographical, demographic, and social—impeded Mexico’s economic development. Once these obstacles were overcome Mexico would become a leading world economic and political power.
Another reason for the great appeal was that Humboldt’s vision was varied since it discussed various branches of the Mexican economy, which provided politicians and investors a wide range of economic visions to choose from.

Before discussing the influence of different parts of Humboldt’s vision of Mexico, it may be helpful to summarize important aspects of it, thereby providing a broader picture. But it should be stressed that this is not a comprehensive picture. Rather, it focuses on some of Humboldt’s prominent themes. Part of Humboldt’s vision focused on trade. A main point that Humboldt stressed was Mexico’s perfect geographical commercial location situated right in the middle of Europe and Asia, a position that destined Mexico to become a leader in world commerce. Humboldt discussed the possibilities of a canal to link the two oceans at length, discussing eight potential spots. He favored Tehuantepec, even if he acknowledged that more research needed to be carried out before the final spot was determined. For Humboldt, technological advance in the transportation sector coupled with freeing New Spain of Spanish commercial restrictions would turn Mexico into a dominant global commercial power.

Agriculture also figured very prominently in his vision. As noted, for Humboldt it was the most significant branch of the economy. Owing to Mexico’s large size, fertile soil (his comparative study showed yields in Mexico were among the world’s highest), and varied climate, he explained, New Spain could produce high yields of almost anything. His discussion of cotton and sugar are cases in point. He noted that Mexico’s production of these important cash crops was limited. But he maintained that things would change. Owing to natural advantages, Mexico was destined to become a world leader in cotton and sugar production. Population increase via colonization was also part of Humboldt’s vision to enhance agriculture. Since Mexico was naturally wealthy but sparsely populated, it needed more hands to exploit its natural wealth. Supporting this vision, Humboldt maintained that Mexico could easily support a ten-fold increase in population. Another part of Humboldt’s vision—and the topic he wrote about in the most depth—was silver mining. For Humboldt, Mexico’s role as the leading silver producer would continue. Further, Mexico could enhance its already dominant position since current production methods were inefficient since the latest and best technology was not utilized. For Humboldt, silver complemented agriculture, for where the former flourished the latter did too. Humboldt’s argument about the positive reciprocal relationship between the two industries countered the “economists’” conventional wisdom, which assumed that a focus on silver took attention away from agriculture and resulted in agrarian decline. A focus on silver, however, had a negative impact on a different branch of the economy: industry. Humboldt saw much promise in Mexican industry but maintained that one of the reasons it was not fully developed was a lack of attention to exploiting industrial metals owing to a focus on precious metals. Spanish policies, which discouraged domestic production, also limited Mexican industry. Hence, for Humboldt, changing priorities and policies would result in the enhancement of Mexican manufacturing.

RECEPTION OF HUMBOLDT’S ECONOMIC VISION
Nationals and foreigners built on and developed different aspects of Humboldt’s economic vision, leading Covarrubias to define Political Essay as a “work in progress” that later writers developed and reformulated. Covarrubias also points out that the fact that Humboldt dedicated sections to different branches of the economy and the relationship between branches stimulated conceptualizing and writing about the economy from a sectoral framework. Rather than a comprehensive discussion of reception of Political Essay, I will provide a few illustrations from different branches of the economy: mining, agriculture, and manufacturing.

MINING: After independence both nationals and foreigners expressed much interest in exploiting the mining industry, especially Mexican silver. In the early 1820s the Mexican government made a deal with British financial interests to develop Mexican mining. It is unsurprising that Mexican liberals, especially, were drawn to Humboldt’s depiction of the silver industry. Not only was there a colonial-era precedent, but Humboldt’s prediction of robust exports of silver also fit well with the liberal theory of comparative advantage, which was influential among Mexican liberals. It made sense to focus on silver owing to Mexico’s comparative advantage.

In the early 1820s Lucas Alamán, a noted Mexican politician, justified the exploitation of the mining sector by repeating one of Humboldt’s arguments: there was a positive relationship between mining and agriculture. However, unlike Humboldt, Alamán deemed mining the most significant branch of the economy (later he would come to favor manufacturing above all else). Interestingly, British promoters reproduced this argument in their promotional literature, thereby suggesting Britain’s involvement in the mining industry was a form of benevolence. By stimulating mining the British would contribute to the development of Mexican agriculture and civilization. Decades later, Mexican economist Guillermo Prieto repeated the Humboldtean claim about the way mining stimulated agriculture. (Humboldt’s argument had loose parallels with Hamilton’s Report on Manufactures, which argued that American industry would stimulate the agrarian sector, a contention that was probably inspired by Hamilton’s concern that agrarian interests would not support his call for government support for manufacturing.)

The British press and financial interests emphasized that they followed the blueprint for mining development articulated in Political Essay. This explicit assertion was probably a consequence of the heavy losses the British experienced in the mid-1820s. They blamed Humboldt for the losses, maintaining that he had deceived them. Henry Ward, a British diplomat in Mexico, did some damage control, contending that it was not fair to pin the blame on Humboldt—the real problem was that British investors had not read Humboldt’s text carefully. For a few years British confidence in Humboldt waned, but in the 1830s, according to some British commentators, confidence in the profitability of Mexican mines was somewhat restored, even if views were a bit more tempered than they had been in the early 1820s. If Humboldt’s predictions of greatness in silver were not entirely realized, silver exports nevertheless
experienced modest growth during the early national era. If this was not a utopia of economic greatness, it wasn’t a dystopia either.

However, some commentators linked Humboldt to the latter during the French Intervention of the 1860s, claiming that the French invaded (and were particularly interested in Mexican silver) since Humboldt depicted Mexico as naturally rich. Actually, the promoter that did the most to advertise Mexico’s natural riches was probably the Frenchman Miguel Chevalier, who wrote about Mexico around the middle of the 19th century, so it appears to be something of an overstatement to blame Humboldt for the French Intervention (even if Chevalier’s account of Mexico’s natural wealth did echo Humboldt). If contemporaries may have missed the mark in their critique, Humboldt may have had a more subtle impact that they overlooked. Like Humboldt, French writers during the Intervention depicted Mexico as naturally rich but underachieving. The French Intervention was justified as a means to develop Mexico’s natural riches, a task Mexicans were apparently not fully equipped for.

Despite the fact that silver remained Mexico’s main export into the early 20th century, the dream of Mexican grandeur grounded in the silver industry diminished in the latter part of the 19th century (ironically, this was a period of increased investment and development of the mining sector). A couple of factors seemed to diminish the importance of silver in the Mexican imagination. One was an increased importance that was placed on industrial development, which made fossil fuels, not silver, paramount. Another factor was silver’s declining international value, a trend that started in the 1870s and continued into the 20th century. This subject provides for a nice transition into a discussion of agriculture, for in the late 19th century, owing to the precious metal’s declining value, many thinkers hoped agriculture would replace silver as Mexico’s main export.

AGRICULTURE: In the early national era, agriculture was another sector that was heavily influenced by Humboldt’s vision. As in the case of mining, Humboldt’s depiction of Mexico as agriculturally wealthy and his vision of Mexico as world leader in cash-crop exports fit well with the liberal theory of comparative advantage. Mexican liberals cited and quoted Humboldt to support their visions of Mexico as an exporter of agricultural goods based on their nation’s comparative advantage in the farming sector.

Tadeo Ortiz de Ayala was the Mexican politician who most sought to realize the Humboldtean agrarian vision in the 1820s and early 1830s. Not only did Ortiz write influential texts, but also crafted policies to implement his ideas. Humboldt’s influence was clear. According to Covarrubias, Ortiz’s vision and concept of wealth closely followed Humboldt’s natural-environment-based concept of riches. Moreover, Ortiz cited and praised Humboldt’s accounts of Mexico’s agrarian wealth, and, like Humboldt, contended farming was Mexico’s most important economic sector. Unsurprisingly, Ortiz’s recipe for agricultural and commercial development followed Humboldt’s strategy: 1) develop a transport system; 2) and import
agricultural colonists, thereby creating a method to exploit and export Mexico’s rich agricultural lands. Further following Humboldt’s model, Ortiz promoted a canal and colonization in the exact regions *Political Essay* had suggested.

Ironically, the one place that a Humboldtean-inspired colonization scheme worked was Texas. Further, as Humboldt had predicted, Texas successfully exported cotton. The problem, of course, was that Texas claimed its independence. Tensions between the US and Mexico that stemmed from Texan independence ultimately led to the Mexican-American War, which resulted in Mexico’s loss of half its territory. Was Humboldt to blame? As in the case of the French Intervention, did a Humboldtean utopia vision of national grandeur transform into a dystopia of foreign domination? Did Humboldt’s depiction of Mexico as naturally rich inspire American aggression? Recall that Humboldt provided Jefferson with maps and a copy of *Political Essay*. Further, the American Pike stole and reproduced Humboldt’s maps. Finally, Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” was agrarian and expansionist. My research has not turned up contemporary charges against Humboldt, however. Further, Texan rhetoric for independence stressed threats to the institution of slavery, not natural resources. Nevertheless, charges against Humboldt started in the late 19th century, and there is a scholarly debate about Humboldt’s culpability today.

It is common knowledge that the agrarian export-boom that Humboldt predicted did not materialize in the early national period. Part of the problem was that the other pieces of Humboldt’s development puzzle did not fall into place: colonization and transport. Interestingly, even some explanations of failure followed Humboldt’s explanations. Take the example of Guillermo Prieto. He repeated Humboldt’s critique of the environment and the Indians (without crediting Humboldt, however). Prieto maintained that Mexico’s agricultural problems partly stemmed from under-consumption, which was a consequence of Mexico’s natural abundance that enabled Indians to effortlessly produce food for their own sustenance and thus remain isolated from market forces. For Prieto, the Humboldtean notion of agrarian riches remained, but obstacles made exploiting it difficult.

Aspects of the Humboldtean vision of agrarian greatness faded during the Porfiriato. Some thinkers came to view colonization as a pipe dream. More importantly, *científicos* challenged the idea that Mexico was privileged by nature in the agrarian sector. Technology, not nature, was the motor-force of agrarian development. Nevertheless, some writers still cited and quoted Humboldt to support their calls for development in the agrarian sector, and added a liberal theoretical twist: owing to Mexico’s rich lands Mexico should exploit its comparative advantage and promote export agriculture. Furthermore, finally, during the Porfiriato, the Humboldtean agrarian vision was realized (albeit not with the grandeur Humboldt envisioned): Mexico built a transport system and exported its agricultural goods (henequen in Yucatan was especially a success story, a product Humboldt had not predicted).
MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY: Lucas Alamán was the most influential promoter of manufacturing during the early national period. Further, he utilized government support (via a development bank) to develop it. There was no consensus on Mexican manufacturing, however. Liberals such as Mora and Prieto opposed government intervention and favored more of a laissez-faire position.

To what extent did Humboldt influence this industrial vision championed by Alamán? My research on this subject is incomplete, so I am only able to speculate. Clearly, in some ways Humboldt departed. His priority sector was agriculture, not manufacturing. Also, Humboldt stressed the importance of natural resources whereas Alamán’s industrial vision highlighted capital. Nevertheless, there were comparisons. As Covarrubias points out, Alamán may have taken the idea of a priority economic sector from Humboldt, even if the two men did not agree upon which sector it should be. Furthermore, Humboldt had supported the idea of Mexican manufacturing and maintained that Mexico had the natural conditions and resources to develop manufacturing. Thus, in some ways he was an antecedent to Alamán (even if some colonial-era thinkers were clearly more important). Finally, some of the justifications that Alamán used to promote manufacturing had similarities to Humboldt’s (though I don’t know if Alamán cited Humboldt). Both men acknowledged the importance of manufacturing to national independence and sovereignty.

During the Porfiriato more of a consensus emerged around the importance of national manufacturing. At this time the general position about manufacturing seemed to become closer to Humboldt’s, but it is unclear the level of influence he had. The Porfirián position of balanced sector development—industry, agriculture, and mining—while not identical to Humboldt, was closer to him than Alamán. And some Porfirián-era commentators actually invoked Humboldt to justify this balanced sectoral development, reminding their readers that Humboldt had complained about the fact that Spain’s stress on precious metals had led to neglect of exploitation of industrial minerals. Thus, some Porfiriastas cited Humboldt to bolster their calls for industrialization.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that Humboldt’s economic vision of Mexican grandeur rooted in natural abundance was very influential in independent 19th-century Mexico. Timing and context partly explain Humboldt’s influence. His work filled a void in the age of independence, a period of increased international interest in Mexico. Humboldt’s global audience, cosmopolitan liberal vision (in which foreigners and nationals built the economy together), and comprehensive coverage also explain his influence. He made Mexico important for both nationals and foreigners, and his comprehensive coverage meant that his readers had a lot of economic material to select from, and thus were likely to find something of interest, which surely increased Humboldt’s relevance. Finally, Humboldt’s vivid picture of sectoral economic development
inspired his readers’ imaginings. Ironically, Humboldt’s own ideal economic vision—a (partly) physisocratic agrarian vision that stressed the importance of production for local consumption—had a limited impact. To the contrary, what made Humboldt influential was the fact that his vision was in some ways amorphous, which enabled readers to creatively build upon it in their own distinct ways.