Explaining the influence of Humboldt’s Political Essay: A Textual Analysis

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Explaining the influence of Humboldt’s *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*:  
A Textual Analysis

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Abstract: Historians have emphasized the tremendous impact that Alexander von Humboldt’s multi-volume *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1811), which depicted Mexico as a treasure house of natural riches, had on foreigners and nationals in independent Mexico. According to Nicolaas Rupke, in Europe, *Political Essay* was the most famous of all Humboldt’s works (and his publications numbered in the dozens). Scholar Walther Bernecker adds that *Political Essay* inspired foreign investment, colonization schemes, and military invasions. Turning to reception on the domestic front, José Enrique Covarrubias maintains that *Political Essay* is best conceived as a “work in progress” that Mexicans built creatively upon. Over the course of the nineteenth century, prominent Mexicans’ writings developed his ideas about trade, sector development (industry, agriculture, mining, and livestock), colonization, and economic policy. Undoubtedly, numerous factors explain why *Political Essay* was so influential in Mexico and abroad. This paper restricts itself to the text itself—thus the answer it provides is incomplete. What features of *Political Essay* explain its great appeal? To respond to this query, this paper explores the ways that *Political Essay*’s methodology, presentation, content, and argumentation contributed to its popularity, authority, and influence.

Introduction

Alexander Von Humboldt (1769-1859), the German scientist-explorer in the vein of Captain Cook, published an extensive amount of scholarship, and academics have shown that the impact of his publications in the Americas and Europe has been wide-ranging and significant. Scholarship has shown that one work that was especially influential was Humboldt’s 4-volume study of Mexico, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, which was originally published in French in 1811, and quickly translated into several languages. In fact, Nicolaas Rupke has demonstrated that in 19th century Europe Humboldt was best known for *Political Essay on the
Kingdom of New Spain (Rupke’s study focused on the reception of Humboldt’s works in France, Germany, and Great Britain during roughly the first half of the 19th century). While a study like Rupke’s has not been carried out for the USA, clearly Humboldt’s work on Mexico fascinated Americans, as the debate over whether Humboldt was an agent of American imperialism in Mexico clearly demonstrates. Unsurprisingly, Political Essay had an enormous impact in Mexico, and that influence has been well-documented by scholars. How do we explain the enormous global impact of Political Essay? This is the question that this paper addresses. While there is some discussion of historical context (particularly towards the end of the paper), the paper primarily limits its investigation to the text itself, focusing on the ways that Political Essay’s methodology, presentation, content, and argumentation contributed to its popularity, authority, and influence. By carefully analyzing Humboldt’s economic message I follow a trend in the 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 failed to take hold in Latin America.) The paper is divided into two sections. The first one carries out an analysis of the contents of Political Essay that highlights aspects of the work that help explain its great influence. The second section speculates on what accounted for Political Essay’s appeal in Mexico and abroad.

Seven observations about Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain

1. While Political Essay is broad in scope (for example, it has individual chapters on demography, administration, and defense), it is primarily an economic text that highlights political economy. This point is demonstrated by the fact that most of the work’s content is on economy, for Humboldt dedicates lengthy sections of the study to it. Furthermore, even some
topics which are not strictly speaking “economic”—for example geography—Humboldt explains, are analyzed from a commercial perspective. This focus, according to Rupke, can be partly explained by the fact that Humboldt relied on colonial sources, which highlighted economic aspects of New Spain. Whatever the case may be, this focus leads Rupke to conclude that scholars have underappreciated the impact of Humboldt the Enlightenment-influenced political economist. Rupke maintains that Humboldt’s commercial focus in Political Essay preceded his Romanticism and pure scientism.

2. Humboldt’s account of the Mexican economy strongly emphasized the wealth contained in natural resources. There has been a lot written on Humboldt’s conception of wealth. Some have emphasized Smith’s impact on Humboldt. Others have stressed the Physiocrats’ influence. More recently José Enrique Covarrubias has pointed to William Petty’s influence. Undoubtedly, there were a range of influences. But this focus overlooks a more basic point. For Humboldt, as Covarrubias has shown, the natural environment was the originator of wealth. The natural environment set the limits for what could be achieved. Hence, for Humboldt, the question was not really overcoming nature, but rather understanding it and benefiting from the gifts it bestowed. Perhaps this point is best illustrated by a later-generation critic of Humboldt. Around 1900 Carlos Díaz Dufoo, who was informed by the idea that capital and science were the generators of riches, maintained that Humboldt’s assertion that Mexico’s northern frontier could not be developed owing to its arid conditions was wrong. Díaz Dufoo explained that capital and technology would transform deserts into gardens, and cited developments in the USA as a case in point.

3. Given Humboldt’s conception of the source of wealth, it is unsurprising that his account provided a very detailed examination of the physical environment. In a sense, Humboldt
revealed Mexico’s wealth via his discussion of the physical environment. One might say that Humboldt discovered—via scientific analysis of Mexican resources, climate, and geography—Mexico’s natural wealth. Wealth, since it was rooted in the physical environment, was, in a sense, a gift of nature. Humboldt’s job was revealing nature’s gifts. Humboldt wanted to expose Mexico’s natural wealth for, as he put it, the “statesman.” Proper policies could only be ascertained by a statesman equipped with a detailed and comprehensive understanding of Mexico’s natural riches. Thus, Humboldt directed the reader to the best industries to develop, and the best ways to develop the economy.

4. Perhaps most importantly, Humboldt’s account of Mexico’s natural environment was very positive. Humboldt’s assessment was that Mexico was privileged with vast natural wealth. Humboldt’s comparative analysis, which compared Mexico’s natural wealth with that of other regions of the Americas, Europe, and Asia, made this point repeatedly. He demonstrated Mexico’s natural advantages in numerous ways. One was his analysis of soil fertility, which showed that Mexico had some of the richest earth in the world. Thus, if plot size was the same, Mexico could produce more than other countries. Humboldt also demonstrated Mexico’s richness via production numbers, which showed Mexico’s impressive output in agriculture and (especially) precious metals. Humboldt showed, again and again, that Mexico’s natural wealth was almost unparalleled.

5. An important feature of this positive assessment was its forecast for future developments. Indeed, along with documenting current conditions, Humboldt wrote a great deal of “imaginings” about Mexico’s future development. Humboldt’s vision was compelling. Owing to the fact that Mexico was privileged with great natural wealth, it was destined for a future of grandeur. Humboldt predicted that Mexico would become one of the leading world regions. 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. Agriculture also figured very prominently—both for national consumption and export—in his vision. His discussion of cotton and sugar are cases in point. He noted that Mexico’s production of these commodities 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. Mineral extraction, both precious metals for export and industrial minerals for national industry, was another part of his vision. In fact, he linked agriculture and mining. Countering conventional wisdom, he maintained that they complemented one another and would flourish together. Population increase via colonization was also part of Mexico’s destiny connected to increased production. 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 much larger population. Conversely, an industry that needed limited hands but offered great possibilities for future profits that Humboldt discussed was the whaling industry.

6. Humboldt’s broad vision hints at the great breadth of his account, which was another important feature of his study. He discussed the extractive industries, agriculture, products of the sea, industry, and trade. His depth on these subjects is perhaps illustrated by Emilio Kouri’s recent work on vanilla production in 19th century Mexico. Kouri was forced to partly rely on
Humboldt since the German’s study still had pertinent information even though it was published almost two centuries ago.

7. How believable was Humboldt’s account? The way he presented it made it appear very authoritative and accurate. He illustrated that he was very aware of the very latest literature on the subject by citing and discussing a wide range of literature, sometimes agreeing and other times disagreeing with the authors he mentioned. Furthermore, he sometimes critiqued travelers’ estimations, maintaining that they were exaggerated. Additionally, his methodology, which combined a range of disciplines together—including statistics, geography, climate, and local knowledge—was impressive. The fact that scholars have maintained that Humboldt forged a method that they label “Humboldtean science” perhaps suggests the degree to which his account and methods were highly regarded. Furthermore, he sometimes shared his methods with readers in the body of the text, explaining the benefits and drawbacks of his methods, and the ways that incomplete information sometimes forced him to use a method that was not optimal.

**Political Essay in Mexico and Abroad**

One can speculate on reasons that Humboldt’s account was so appealing to Creole nationalists in Mexico. One explanation is that Humboldt perhaps confirmed pre-existing beliefs, which may have made *Political Essay* particularly appealing. As Covarrubias argues, Humboldt’s work statistically confirmed creoles’ belief that Mexico was naturally rich, an idea that was particularly prominent during the late colonial era. Another explanation is tied to Mexican nationalism in the early national era. Creole nationalists could utilize Humboldt’s claims of Mexican grandeur to reinforce their own bold predictions of national greatness for their fledgling nation. Humboldt also may have appealed to nationalists for political reasons. After all, there was a nationalist anti-Spanish element in his book. He repeatedly critiqued Spanish
economic policies. He described them as “unenlightened” and in the interest of Spain, not Mexico. He asserted that Spanish policies placed Mexico in “shackles” that impeded New Spain’s prosperity and maintained that once Mexico was freed from these fetters it would prosper. This anti-Spanish nationalist strain in Political Essay may have increased Humboldt’s stature with Creole nationalists. Further, for Creole liberal nationalists who championed legal equality (at least for men), Humboldt’s stature may have been enhanced owing to his critique of inequality and poverty in New Spain. For example, in 1836 the famous Mexican liberal José Mora published a work that praised Humboldt but explained that his depiction of Mexican society as very unequal no longer rang true since the fledgling nation had made positive strides toward establishing equality. Additionally, Mexican liberals like Mora who attacked the colonial heritage may have found Humboldt’s critique of colonialism a source of support in their efforts to dismantle remnants of the corporate colonial order.

Another explanation for Humboldt’s appeal is that elements in his analysis perhaps resonated with different economic interests in independent Mexico. Mexican liberals who embraced comparative advantage and saw their nation’s future in the exploitation and export of its vast natural riches could draw upon Humboldt’s depiction of Mexico as rich in natural wealth. This same group may have also been attracted to Humboldt’s assertion that Spain’s trade restrictions limited Mexico’s prosperity. For these liberal thinkers, Humboldt’s analysis fit with their embrace of free trade and their vision of Mexico having a distinct place in the international division of labor—namely an exporter of raw materials and an importer of finished goods. Colonization schemes to bring agricultural colonists—that were also inspired by Humboldt—also figured prominently in this liberal vision. Owing to the great diversity of Humboldt’s work, pro-industrialists could also invoke him to support their agenda. After all, Humboldt had
promoted Mexican industrialization, a push he had made in his plea that Mexico place more emphasis on exploiting industrial minerals and less stress on the silver industry. Humboldt argued that the latter was linked to the export sector and solely benefited Spain, providing no advantages for its colony, Mexico.

Finally, Humboldt’s great authority and stature in independent Mexico may also explain his influence on Mexicans. Authors were obligated to cite and discuss Humboldt since it was so common that it came to be expected. Additionally, owing to the German’s stature, citing Humboldt may have been a strategy creoles utilized to legitimate their own agendas. (It was not until the late 19th century that he became somewhat controversial and somewhat discredited in Mexico.)

Let us now turn to Humboldt’s influence on foreigners. This brief discussion will necessarily be broad, making few distinctions between foreigners from different countries. As in the case of Creole nationalists, timing was probably an important factor in Humboldt’s great appeal to foreigners. After all, a vacuum had been created since Spain was no longer in the picture. Spain’s demise created an opportunity for other European countries and the USA, which explains why they were so interested in Mexico and, by extension, Political Essay. The time-line of the Napoleonic Wars probably had a similar consequence. The era of war ended shortly before Mexican independence, which enabled Europe to turn its attention to its commercial interests in newly independent Latin America. Similarly, in the early 19th century the USA (particularly leaders like Jefferson, and his “empire of liberty”) was very interested in Western expansion and consequently also in acquiring Mexican territory. No wonder the American Pike stole and reproduced Humboldt’s map of Mexico.
With Spain out of the picture, perhaps Humboldt’s analysis of the commercial opportunities afforded by Mexico was particularly appealing to foreigners. In this regard, Humboldt’s lengthy discussion of constructing a canal was probably of great interest. After all, Humboldt predicted that building a canal would make Mexico the dominant region in world trade between the Atlantic and Pacific. Undoubtedly, British commercial interests, especially, saw an opportunity. Humboldt’s discussion of Mexican imports and demography may have also held some appeal since they also pointed to new commercial opportunities for foreigners. Furthermore, in the decades after independence Mexico received more imports than any other Latin American nation (of course, Mexico would no longer have this leading role in the latter part of the 19th century).

Foreigners were also very interested in Humboldt’s descriptions of Mexico’s natural wealth. While they had a commonality with Mexican nationalists in this regard, there nevertheless may have been some slight distinctions. Unlike Creole nationalists, foreigners were largely uninterested in Humboldt’s nationalist vision for Mexican development, which highlighted the creation of national industry and emphasized agricultural production for local consumption rather than the export of “colonial” products. In contrast, foreigners were interested in Humboldt’s detailed and encyclopedic accounts of Mexico’s natural wealth, particularly the products Humboldt labeled “colonial” (i.e., products for export). Thus, not unlike Spain during the colonial era, foreigners were most interested in Mexico’s precious metals. Humboldt had supplied extensive information about them. His section on silver was the most detailed and lengthy part of his entire work. This is somewhat ironic since Humboldt had complained that Mexico focused too much on silver and needed to diversify its mineral production and increase agriculture production. Then why was his account of silver so extensive? Probably because there
was a lot of information available about it coupled with the fact that he had studied mining and knew a lot about the subject.

Finally, like their Mexican counterparts, some foreigners (particularly promoters) may have invoked Humboldt to legitimate their proposals and to entice investors and governments to support their expansionist projects. If *Political Essay*, the authoritative text, substantiated promoters’ ideas it would give those ideas greater credibility.