

# PHILOSOPHER

## WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT AND

**Dr Detmar Doering** examines the thinking of Wilhelm von Humboldt, perhaps Germany's most famous and quintessential liberal thinker, whose treatise *The Limits of State Action* is a radical defence of a minimal state. Humboldt combined his radicalism with pragmatic reformism – which is why today he is better known as the statesman who reformed the educational system of his native Prussia. What held his liberal radicalism and political pragmatism together was an elaborate theory of 'self-education', which later inspired John Stuart Mill and his book *On Liberty*.



# R OF FREEDOM

## D EARLY GERMAN LIBERALISM

It is difficult to say when liberalism as a genuine political philosophy came into being. In England, one usually thinks of John Locke and his *Two Treatises on Government* (1690) as the starting point. In Germany, however, the question cannot be answered so easily, although there is one top candidate: Wilhelm von Humboldt's famous treatise *The Limits of State Action*, written in 1792 at the time of the French Revolution, would unquestionably be considered by most Germans as the equivalent to Locke's *Two Treatises*. At the very least, it is difficult to find another work of such outstanding relevance and quality within the German liberal tradition.

Of course, liberal ideas had already made some advance within the various German principalities, but the French Revolution inspired the first wave of strict liberalism in the political world of the Old Empire. German thinkers like Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) or Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) began to speak out for the rights of man and for absolute freedom of opinion and press. Fichte (who during the Napoleonic Wars changed his views toward a nationalistic type of socialism) in particular radicalised the then fashionable idea of a 'social contract' to a point where every citizen could nullify his obligation toward the state. His book *Contribution to the Recti-*

Wilhelm von  
Humboldt (1767–  
1835)

*fication of the Public's Judgment of the French Revolution* (1792) predated much of today's anarcho-capitalist version of libertarianism.

As in most European countries, the French Revolution sparked a heated debate between its radical advocates and its more conservative critics, which influenced much of nineteenth-century political thought. Humboldt's *Limits of State Action* has a special – perhaps the foremost – place on the liberal side of this debate. Firstly, it is based on a very sober and non-polarising analysis. Secondly, it became perhaps the greatest classic from among the writings on political philosophy of that age. Thirdly, it became so despite the fact that it was virtually unknown among his contemporaries. The reason for this last was that Humboldt – expecting problems with Prussian censorship, which had become more rigorous during the Revolution – published only a few sections of the book in two journals, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* and Friedrich Schiller's *Neue Thalia*. Only in 1851 – sixteen years after Humboldt's death – was the complete book published.

### Conservative or liberal?

Wilhelm von Humboldt was born in Potsdam on 22 June 1767 into a family of the lower aristocracy. He was brought up with his equally famous brother, the

explorer and scientist Alexander von Humboldt, in the tolerant environment of enlightened absolutism. In 1788 he started his study of law and classical literature at Göttingen University. Here he found favourable conditions for the further development of his enlightened and liberal mind. Göttingen was part of the principality of Hanover, which was governed by the British King George III (a Hanoverian) in personal union. This meant that Göttingen University allowed very much the same degree of intellectual freedom that one could find in Britain. Politically, a moderate 'Whiggism' seemed to be prevalent in most faculties.

When, in 1789, the French Revolution broke out, Humboldt undertook a journey to Paris on the invitation of Mirabeau. This he did, together with his tutor Joachim Heinrich Campe, in order to watch the 'funeral ceremony of French despotism'. He came back somewhat disillusioned, but from then on was captivated by the subject of the French Revolution and its consequences.

His first work, the *Thoughts on Constitutions, Suggested by the New French Constitution*, published in 1791, never became a classic like *The Limits of State Action*, but was still quite original in its own way. In this essay, Humboldt declared some sympathy with the ideals of the Revolution, but did not

## PHILOSOPHER OF FREEDOM

believe that these ideals could be sustained throughout its course. Thus he wrote: 'Mankind had suffered under one extreme; it had to seek deliverance in another extreme. Will this constitution last? As far as analogy with history is concerned, no!' The ahistorical and inorganic approach of the Revolution, Humboldt argued, could never work. A more gradualist approach might have produced a more harmonious development. He felt strongly that revolutionary force impeded individual self-development, retarded natural social evolution, and rewarded only conformity to the imposed order.

Many observers have noted that, in this, Humboldt echoed many of the ideas of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which became the bible of all anti-revolutionary writings in Europe. There is, however, absolutely no evidence that Humboldt had read Burke at the time. The best explanation for the similarity with Burke could simply be that Humboldt had studied in Göttingen, where a moderate reformist type of liberalism flourished that was strongly influenced by Burkean concepts.

In England there had been a debate from the very beginning as to whether Burke – who had supported the American revolutionaries in 1776 – was more a conservative or a liberal thinker. As a consequence of this ambiguity in Burke's work there were both conservative and (moderate) liberals to be found among his philosophical followers in Germany.

Both Georg Friedrich Brandes (1758–1810) and August Wilhelm Rehberg (1757–1836) – two of the leading critics of the French Revolution, but ones who never lapsed into an outright reactionary direction like many others – came from Göttingen University and considered themselves to be Burkeans. Rehberg became famous mainly as a leading critic of Kant's rigorous moral philosophy, which he found potentially dangerous when applied to politics. Another example of the

'Göttingen spirit' was the Baron vom Stein (1757–1831) who, like Humboldt, became politically influential during the short-lived Prussian reform era at the end of the Napoleonic Wars and who was the founding father of local self-administration in Prussia. He, too, considered himself a Burkean. For a while, the 'Göttingen School' exercised, due to its pragmatic reformism, an enormous influence over Prussian politics.

Immediately after Humboldt had completed the *Thoughts on Constitutions* he began to write his *Limits of State Action*. Philosophically the book was not in line with the writings of the 'Göttingen School', as it did not base its arguments on the empiricism and utilitarianism that prevailed among the members of that school. He should not, therefore, be counted as a representative of that school in any strict sense. Yet, despite the fact that Humboldt's ideas about the state were fairly radical (especially in the German context), like most members of the 'Göttingen School' he still clung to the principle of reform as opposed to revolution.

### German liberalism

More than previous German writings on political philosophy, Humboldt's treatise on *The Limits of State Action* was the embodiment of genuine liberalism. Others may have inserted liberal elements in their thought, but Humboldt's book perhaps is the most quintessential work of German liberalism.

Of course, the old proponents of natural law, such as Pufendorf and others, had always thought about the political order – the state – as something that should be restrained by law. But what makes a liberal a liberal is that he believes the individual and the personal sphere to be the basic moral axiom from which the ideal social and political order is deduced and out of which it is legitimised. John Locke did this when he made life and property – the principle of self-ownership

**He felt strongly that revolutionary force impeded individual self-development, retarded natural social evolution, and rewarded only conformity to the imposed order.**

– the basis for his theory of government. This is what made the *Treatises of Government* a specifically liberal classic. Humboldt, in his *Limits of State Action*, further gave this type of individualistic approach its own distinct 'flavour'. In the most famous passage of the work, Humboldt writes:

The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the first and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes; but there is, besides, another essential – intimately connected with freedom, it is true – a variety of situations. Even the most free and self-reliant of men is hindered in his development when set in a monotonous situation.

This passage contains some very complex and perhaps contradictory philosophical assumptions. Some scholars try to make Humboldt look like a romantic critic of the enlightenment frame of thought. And, indeed, there are elements of romanticism to be found in his thought. But Humboldt tries to reconcile both strands. The passage makes it clear that the 'harmonious development' of the individual should happen under the precondition of freedom – and that is what reason dictates.

This first assumption is almost certainly inspired by Kant, whom Humboldt had studied intensively in Göttingen, and of whom he writes, in *The Limits of State Action*, that he 'has never been surpassed in profundity'. Yet there is a clearly non-Kantian streak in his thought when he speaks about the 'most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole'. In modern (Kantian) terms this would make Humboldt suspected of being an Aristotelian essentialist and metaphysician.

This, of course, would be slightly unfair and, above all, would lead to a severe misunderstanding of Humboldt's achievement. Even assuming that Humboldt was an essentialist, it cannot be denied that his is a vastly different form of essentialism from the Aristotelian one. In fact, the difference is revolutionary.

While Aristotle and his philosophical descendants put the general before the individual – the perfection of a given individual entity was to be achieved by approaching closer to its general 'essence' or a general definition – Humboldt never did so. The 'harmonious development' is not one of man or mankind in general, but one of an individual as an individual. It is all about individuality. Humboldt is clearly influenced here by the romanticism of Rousseau, Goethe and, above all, Friedrich Schiller, whose *Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man* of 1795 were, conversely, inspired by Humboldt.

The 'harmonious development' is achieved by what Humboldt calls *Bildung*. This German word is almost impossible to translate. In Humboldt's context it is usually rendered as 'self-education', but that – although it is the best we have – does not fully capture all the connotations of the German word, especially the aesthetic dimension. Humboldt took his very subjectivist approach from Rousseau, whom he admired as an educational writer, but obviously disliked as a political philosopher. Hence he asked in his *Limits of State Action*:

When shall we learn, moreover, to set less value on the outward result of actions than on the inner temper and disposition from which they flow? When will the man arise to do for legislation what Rousseau did for education, and draw our attention from mere external, physical results to the internal self-education of mankind?

All this sets Humboldt apart from previous liberal educational

thinkers, such as John Locke, who still believed in the 'external' ends of education, namely the ideal of a gentleman who was prepared to assume his public duties. In this respect, and more so than Locke, Humboldt broke with Aristotle and his definition of the purpose of man as that of a 'political animal'. Political engagement to Humboldt was part of individual development and subordinated to it, but not a higher purpose above individuality. Potentially this pure romanticist individualism could have been as brutally revolutionary as that of Rousseau himself, but Humboldt, who, as we saw, was rather fearful of revolutions, managed to escape these dangerous consequences.

For Humboldt, *Bildung* aims at internal development and harmony, but this end defies any clear definition. This is why Humboldt in this sense is not an 'essentialist' – an Aristotelian turned individualist – at all. What Humboldt is speaking about is an open process in time and space. As Clemens Menze, one of Germany's leading scholars on Humboldt, says: 'Self-education ... does not pursue a specific goal (*Zweck*), but a complete man's own peculiar goal-orientation without any concrete goal (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne bestimmten Zweck*).'*Bildung* can never, by its nature, be completed. It approaches an end that will always remain undefined and unreachable. It therefore can only develop continuously in unity with the existing state of the process and then try to proceed further. In interaction and inter-thinking with the world, a person's development can find its concrete expression, whereas every utopian vision that radically transcends reality can only deliver empty abstractions. On the other hand, this process must mean improvement beyond the status quo, since surrendering oneself to the concrete world without seeking to use the widest possible experience as material for self-education will only lead to self-alienation. This, for instance, is the case if education is reduced to mere vocational training for one's job.

### Education and reformism

From this it follows that true *Bildung* can never be revolutionary but, if properly understood, will always be evolutionary. In many ways Humboldt here argues in a very modern, Hayekian way. One must not forget that Humboldt's academic interests beyond political philosophy all pointed in this direction. Learning was about understanding and finding rules. This idea is quite apparent in Humboldt's linguistic writings, which contributed considerably to his lasting fame. He was one of the foremost linguists of his age, and not merely well acquainted – as his classical studies would have suggested – with ancient European languages. In 1828, for instance, he wrote a book on *The Languages of the South Sea Islands*. His linguistic work is still revered and often quoted by linguists, such as Noam Chomsky. Humboldt is credited with being the first linguist to identify human language as a rule-governed system, rather than just a collection of words and phrases paired with meanings. In other words, it is a process that is both like and interwoven with education. 'Man is only man through his language', he later said. Language, or better, the capacity for language, is not an invention, but is given to man by nature. The evolution of a concrete language, however, is not entirely pre-determined by this, because it will always be the product of tradition and individual evolution intertwined.

Here it becomes apparent why politically Humboldt is also a reformer rather than a revolutionary. Just as mankind could not have invented or deliberately designed a highly cultivated language out of nothing, i.e. without any cultural evolution in time, so it could not have invented or deliberately designed a civilised free society and polity. In both cases, primitivism and over-simplification would prevail, whatever the highfalutin claims of the designers were.

Such an evolutionism certainly frustrates the revolutionary

**The 'harmonious development' is not one of man or mankind in general, but one of an individual as an individual. It is all about individuality.**

## PHILOSOPHER OF FREEDOM



energies of the disciples of Rousseau, but will it not lead to mere conservatism? Humboldt's reconciliation of evolutionary reformism with the radicalism of his views on the state may be surprising, but is the result of a consistent theory.

Man, argues Humboldt, cannot live alone. In order to maintain and develop his 'self' he has to engage himself with and within this world; his improvement cannot come out of nothing, but from coming to terms with the world. On the other hand, the 'purpose of mankind', which is individuality as an open process, presupposes the very possibility of pursuing one's self-education. This self-education or *Bildung* ought to end as a 'harmonious development'. This per se means that it should be a process without force, and instead one of mutual voluntary self-organisation.

Humboldt was an individualist, but by no means an 'atomist'. In the process of self-education one learns and rises to the level where such cultivated voluntary self-organisation is possible. To impose a new 'free' state-organised order on a people not culturally mature enough usually makes things worse and thwarts further self-education. The enforcement of that cultural maturity by law necessarily means uniformity – the very thing Humboldt wants to avoid. Humboldt's self-educated man has nothing to do with the 'new man' imagined by Marxists and other political utopians who believe that a perfectly designed revolutionary state is the necessary precondition for the enforcement of the perfectly self-educated human being. The state not only has to preserve the precondition of *Bildung* – the open process of freedom – but also in itself develop in an open process corresponding with the internal 'harmonious development' of the individuals of which it is composed.

Essentially, Humboldt comes to the conclusion that a minimal state, that guarantees personal freedom against aggression, is the only form of government

that allows self-education to its fullest extent. Ideally, the state should not be involved in positive welfare, but leave it to natural and spontaneous benevolence. It should not meddle with education, because states love conformity, which would be the death of education. People should create their own institutions to organise themselves, whereas every 'top-down' organisation is an evil. Humboldt himself practised what he preached. His own self-education after his studies in Göttingen took place as he had advocated in *The Limits of State Action* – and as, according to him, all education should take place – through a series of voluntary associations. He became a regular member of the 'salon' of Henriette Herz, a leading Jewish intellectual. Through his future wife Caroline von Dacheroden, whom he married in 1791, Humboldt met Friedrich Schiller, Goethe and other important authors of German romanticism.

It cannot be left unremarked, however, that, although Humboldt agreed with Rousseau's view that education should be aimed at the individual and their particular talents rather than at rank and status, his concrete description of the actual content of such an education (such as classical language and educated conversation) was very aristocratic indeed. It was an education for a wealthy man of leisure.

This, however, is not essential to his work. The idea of voluntary self-education is universal and it could – and should – begin where it is most needed, that is with the uneducated classes. John Stuart Mill, who was – as we shall see – influenced by Humboldt, saw this with great clarity. In his classic *On Liberty*, Mill argues that where there is no aristocracy, but where public opinion rules instead, there is a constant danger of 'collective mediocrity' becoming the dominant force – a force that must be countered by education.

This plea for voluntary self-organisation was successfully practised and encouraged by German

liberals in the course of the nineteenth century – especially after the belated, but sensational publication of *The Limits of State Action*. The co-operative movement (*Genossenschaften*) founded by the radical liberal Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch is a good example – just like the many ‘Working Men’s Learning Societies’ that sprang up from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This is why it would be quite wrong to associate Humboldt entirely with his activities as a reformer in the *state’s* educational system.

Those who were around at the time of the first publication of the book comprehended the radicalism of Humboldt. While it might have been expected that a book written roughly sixty years before would not have been of much interest to the people of 1851, they were in fact excited by it. One of the authors who was most influenced was the English philosopher John Stuart Mill. His famous essay *On Liberty* (1859) is probably one of the best known classics of liberalism ever published. Mill’s defence of freedom of thought, speech, and action is widely acknowledged. Less known is that he constantly refers to Humboldt as his intellectual precursor and inspiration.

Mill began *On Liberty* around 1854, when Humboldt’s work was first published in English and had caused some sensation. The question of whether Humboldt stimulated Mill to write his famous essay is open to debate, yet Mill’s frequent references to Humboldt in the text suggest a very strong connection. In his autobiography Mill writes: ‘The only author who had preceded me ... of whom I thought it appropriate to say anything, was Humboldt.’ Mill cites Humboldt as a formative influence, quoting him both directly and in paraphrase throughout his books. To be sure, Mill interpreted Humboldt within his own utilitarian framework of thought – individuality was an ‘element of well-being’ and was useful to the progress of society as diversity in excellence. He did not embrace

the more metaphysical aspects of Humboldt’s neo-humanistic teleology. While Humboldt had somehow developed an aesthetic theory of politics, Mill did not. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Humboldt’s book enhanced the tendency in Mill’s intellectual development to create a less mechanistic type of utilitarianism than the one he had learned from his father James Mill or from Jeremy Bentham.

### Humboldt the reformer

After the discovery of his *Limits of State Action* in 1851, Humboldt was clearly perceived outside Germany as the country’s quintessential and most radical proponent of early liberalism; however, his reputation within Germany was somewhat different. There are probably two reasons for this: one has something to do with his active role in politics; the other is connected with his political writings themselves.

It might be startling to some to hear that the author of such an anti-statist treatise as *The Limits of State Action* actually spent most of his career in the service of the Prussian government. For instance, from 1810 to 1813 Humboldt was the chief Prussian diplomat in Vienna. He acted as a chief negotiator both before and after Napoleon’s defeat, and served in London for the Prussian crown. In 1819 he again became a minister, this time for Estate Affairs (Diet affairs). However, in Germany today he is better known for his brief engagement as Minister of Public Instruction, a post he took over in 1809.

Next to Stein, Humboldt was perhaps the leading representative of the reform government during the Napoleonic Wars. Prussia’s failure to defeat Napoleon made it necessary to carry out long-needed and thoroughgoing reform within the state. A peculiar brand of liberalism came into existence that was very typical of Prussia: *Beamten-Liberalismus* (‘civil servant’s liberalism’). Enlightened persons from the top

**Humboldt was an individualist, but by no means an ‘atomist’. In the process of self-education one learns and rises to the level where such cultivated voluntary self-organisation is possible.**

of the Prussian bureaucracy tried to introduce liberal and modernising reform ‘top-down’. Humboldt was in charge of education and he began with reforms that proved to be outstandingly efficient and durable.

His approach to these reforms could be considered as ‘organic’. A multi-tiered system of educational institutions was introduced throughout the land. Each of the tiers was designed to make it possible for everyone, independent of status, to develop himself and to come closer to the ideal of the ‘highest and most harmonious development’. The system began with an elementary school for the basic schooling, and continued into the *Gymnasium* (the central element of the school system) that prepared for the university. The university, finally, was conceived of as allowing something close to human perfection. It was not supposed to be a kind of higher vocational training, but was meant to promote universal intellectual education beyond any narrow subject. Essentially this system remained intact until the 1960s, when much of it was dismantled by the ‘68 rebellion and its aftermath.

This – undoubtedly great – achievement almost completely defined Humboldt’s reputation and posthumous fame in Germany. However, this narrow interpretation does not place Humboldt in the context of his early works. In fact, *The Limits of State Action* has, in particular, often been interpreted as a youthful aberration.

Hence the question arises whether Humboldt changed his mind over the time. In other words, was the later Humboldt, the reformer of 1809, still a classical liberal? Many authors have denied Humboldt’s consistency. They may well be wrong. Much of his conduct within the bureaucracy and during his time as minister speaks of quite strong liberal convictions. He kept in contact with liberals – especially in France (which he visited again in 1797 and 1800) – throughout

## PHILOSOPHER OF FREEDOM

his life. The 'Ideologues', such as Constant or Madame de Staël, always remained politically close to him. Although he never again engaged in purely philosophical works on politics, he launched several memoranda in favour of a new constitution for Prussia and Germany. Most noteworthy is his *Memorandum on the German Constitution* (*Denkschrift über die Deutsche Verfassung*) of 1813, in which he tried to design safeguards against both the arbitrariness of monarchical rule and the instability of democracy, and which he had discussed intensively with his liberal friends, among them the Abbé Sieyès and Baron vom Stein. In this memorandum he maintained that in a future united Germany 'freedom is the basis of all the advantages which, for his individual existence, the German may draw out of an association of Germany to a whole.' Freedom was still his top priority and, again, it was embedded in an evolutionary framework. The almost logical consequence was that a unified German state had to be decentralised as much as possible. Humboldt advocated a confederation (as opposed to a consolidated federal government) which could take into account the cultural and political diversity of Germany. 'Such a diversity alone is not only harmless, but is necessary in order to reconnect the constitution of each *land* (state) strictly with the peculiarity of its national character.'

The project for the German constitution was rejected by the conservative monarchists who had won the upper hand in Prussia after 1810, and consequently was never realised. The future struggle for unification was left to liberals of a far more centralist type.

As regards reform, Humboldt was able to tolerate slow and incomplete success, but he never tolerated regress or any deviation from the ultimate liberal goal. For that reason his relationship with the governments he served in was always a strained one. Humboldt left his post as Minister for Instruction in 1810 after only six-

teen months, because he was not allowed to carry out more drastic reforms. In 1819 he finally quit public life (and remained outside politics until his death in 1835) in protest against Metternich's Karlsberg Decrees, which introduced more censorship of the press. These are not the actions of a believer in the infallibility of state authority, but that of a liberal critic of state authority.

Much of his reformism after 1809 was already anticipated in his *Limits of State Action*. As has been said, the anti-revolutionary dimension of this otherwise very radical work is often overlooked. Reform in accordance with the state of cultural development, but with a clear liberal perspective in mind, was the strategy recommended in the book, and this is exactly what Humboldt did. One has to keep in mind the state of education before his reforms. When Humboldt joined the liberal reform government in 1809, he advocated the abolition of military schools (*Kadettenhäuser*) and the closing of schools reserved for the nobility, and he opposed the creation of special middle schools for adolescents either uninterested or financially unable to undertake university studies. Humboldt wanted German schools to be places where students would study together free of state-imposed barriers.

Most of all, while he was not able to privatise universities, he at least managed to give them academic autonomy and independence. The state's chief task, he wrote in 1810, was to preserve the universities' 'freedom of activity'. He thus tried to find a way to ensure that, while government may have some influence over the establishment of universities, it could not control their curriculums or the direction of their research activities. Therefore, in 1809 he could still write, very much in a similar tone to his earlier years, that 'the state was not an institute for education, but one of law'. One of the causes for the decline of the universities before Humboldt's reforms was the con-

stant intervention of the King in academic affairs, usually on behalf of favoured religious or philosophical factions. In 1809 Prussian universities were in a rotten state. Autonomy and decentralisation were not the perfect solutions, but – even by the anti-statist logic of *The Limits of State Action* – were certainly a huge step in the right direction. The reforms also never created and never were intended to create a state monopoly in education. Home schooling was still allowed (it was abolished only in the 1920s), and Humboldt always maintained that most of a person's education should take place outside the school system, in the private sphere and in voluntary associations.

### Individualism and nationalism

All in all, the reforms of 1809 can hardly be held against his liberal creed or his consistency. However, since they were so relevant to the future of Germany, it is easy to understand why Humboldt in Germany was always seen as a state reformer and not as an anti-statist liberal.

However, there might also be another reason for that, and one which is inherent to his work. *The Limits of State Action* is not easy reading and the arguments are both complex and balanced. If taken out of its complex context, the basic axiom of *The Limits of State Action* is open to misuse and was, indeed, quite often misused. In theory, Humboldt's concept of self-realisation can be separated from freedom. Most neo-Marxist policies today interpret the concept as being connected with 'positive' welfare rights. The state, it is argued, has to provide the material means for that very self-realisation.

The same is true with the second precondition for self-realisation, the 'variety of situations', which can also be disconnected from freedom. Cultural 'diversity' today has, as a consequence of the downfall of Soviet communism, taken the place once held

**The almost logical consequence was that a unified German state had to be decentralised as much as possible.**

by egalitarianism in most statist thinking. The anti-globalisation movement takes it as a battle-cry against free trade. There is, indeed, a legitimate question as to whether the 'variety of situations' is really so 'intimately connected' with freedom. Did not the dreadful experience of slavery in the Gulag make a great writer out of Solzhenitsyn, while working under free contract on an assembly line can drive all excellence from one's brain?

Humboldt here comes close to views that could be quite frightening. Although in his *Limits of State Action* he does not in any way legitimise war (still less wars of conquest!), he nevertheless is able to hold an astonishingly positive view of war as something beneficial to his educational ideal, because, as he writes:

Now, regarded in this light, war seems to be one of the most salutary phenomena for the culture of human nature; and it is not without regret that I see it disappearing more and more from the scene. It is the fearful extremity through which all that active courage – all that endurance and fortitude – are steeled and tested, which afterwards achieve such varied results in the ordinary conduct of life, and which alone give it that strength and diversity, without which facility is weakness, and unity is inanity.

Put in its proper context, this quotation loses much of its brutality. Humboldt was against standing armies, because even in military affairs the educational ideal could only be reached via voluntary co-operation. It seems that Humboldt, when he wrote this, had not the reality of a modern national state's army in mind, but was somewhat carried away by his enthusiasm for the ancient Greek world, where the *polis* ideally was a community of small elites with little separation between the public and private sphere, and with little distinction between civil and military affairs. In this idealised view, such a *polis* was less a state

**Humboldt was Germany's chief representative of early liberalism and perhaps, as Friedrich August von Hayek once put it, even Germany's 'greatest philosopher of freedom'.**

than a voluntary association. This, however, was not as fantastically unrealistic as one might suppose. Until the mid-nineteenth century it was a common assumption of constitutional lawyers in Germany that local communities did not have the legal character of a lower tier of the state. In fact, lawyers like Johann Caspar Bluntschli, a Swiss-born liberal from south-west Germany, maintained that small country villages were no genuine subdivisions of the state. They were based, rather, on the 'principle of co-operative association', as Bluntschli wrote in his book *General Public Law (Allgemeines Statsrecht)* of 1851. This view was shared by many. In the earlier world of the Old Empire, which still existed in 1792 when Humboldt wrote his *Limits of State Action*, local defence was quite often self-organised by the citizens. Therefore in 1792 it was still possible to consider the necessary task of defence against foreign aggressors as a matter of personal responsibility and, therefore, as an essential element of personal development.

However, in an extended national state with a centralised army based on conscription, passages such as the one quoted above could only serve to support the militaristic tendencies within the state, which Humboldt would surely have rejected clearly and with vigour. Later, when during the 'War of Liberation' against Napoleon an aggressive nationalism emerged in Germany, a bellicose rhetoric like the one used by Humboldt here was misused and abused by many romantic writers – such as by the poet Theodor Körner, who fell in battle against Napoleon in 1813, and whose book *Lyre and Sword* was published posthumously, or by Fichte in his *Addresses to the German Nation* of 1808.

In fact, around that time there was a broad shift of opinion within the romantic movement from individualism to nationalistic collectivism. The enthusiastic language of romanticism was still retained, but the meaning of

the basic concepts had changed. Liberty, once hailed as personal freedom, became more and more identified with the collectivist notion of 'national freedom'. It has to be noted, however, that Humboldt never went this way and remained an individualist throughout his life. In 1819 he could still write in a memorandum to vom Stein that it was the ultimate task of every constitution to protect 'the individual personal security of being treated according to the law, of property, of the freedom of conscience, of the press' – which was essentially what he had demanded in his *Limits of State Action*.

### Philosopher of freedom

In the context of the later perception of Humboldt, his romantic views on war – like his reform of state education – could only further distort and transform his image within Germany. It is therefore time to put things right. By stressing his consistency and by placing the Humboldt of *The Limits of State Action* together with the Humboldt of the great educational reforms of 1809, one may reach a more fair and balanced view. Humboldt, then, can be clearly recognised as an author and a statesman whose basic ideas of political thought had been formed under the influence of enlightenment humanism and the debate on the French Revolution and who tried to put his ideas into practice as much as possible. The later view of his work in Germany should not blind us to the indisputable fact that Humboldt was Germany's chief representative of early liberalism and perhaps, as Friedrich August von Hayek once put it, even Germany's 'greatest philosopher of freedom'.

*Dr Detmar Doering is Director of the Liberal Institute of the Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung in Potsdam. This article was originally a lecture given at a seminar of the CREPHE (ESCP-EAP) and the CREA (Ecole Polytechnique), delivered in Paris on 22 January 2004.*