

## 20. The Encounter of *republic* and *cosmos*: Arendt and Humboldt

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*Voices from outer space:*

Soichi Noguchi: “We are citizens of outer space.”

Yuri Gagarin: “I saw how beautiful our planet is.

People, let’s preserve and multiply this beauty, not destroy it!”

Nicole Stott, on behalf of 18 astronauts to the delegates  
of the Paris Climate Conference 2015:

“The one thing we all wish is that groups like yours could be holding your meeting  
in space with the beautiful horizon to horizon view of our planet as a backdrop. It  
would be an awe-inspiring distraction for sure, but there would be nothing better  
for reinforcing the significance of what you’re doing there today.”

The location of these astronauts is not the Archimedean point from which, according to Arendt, cosmic extra-terrestrial energy in the form of nuclear energy is directed to Earth.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, it is the physical location of a sensual view of our planet, whose limitedness, togetherness and beauty is rendered visible. The earth appears as a terrestrial globe, but at the same time as a world in Arendt’s sense, as a space of interpersonal relationships, at least as a potential space, as a potential world. For we know that Arendt’s illuminating account of the human conditionality of plurality simultaneously as equality and diversity<sup>2</sup>, and freedom simultaneously as action and the assumption of its “downside”, responsibility<sup>3</sup>, merely describes the possibility of its full potential. The real and at the same time imaginary view of the earth from this location reveals in the common everyday life a constant struggle between the realization of plurality, freedom and responsibility, on the one hand, and the pursuit of hegemony, sovereignty and the oppression and destruction of worldly spaces, on

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- 1 Hannah Arendt: *The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man*. In: *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin. 2006, Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, Ch. 24.
  - 2 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., pp. 35–37.
  - 3 Hannah Arendt: *Collective Responsibility*, in: James S. Bernauer (ed.): *Amor Mundi, Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*. Berlin: Springer 1987, pp. 43–50.

the other. The common world is rife with conflict zones. Not only are they caused by failed states and hegemonic powers, they are even encouraged by the fact that the world itself is a kind of failed community in which even a shared, but largely powerless instrument like the “United Nations” has little directive force.

With the emergence of the discussions about the Anthropocene, it is no longer only a question of defending human plurality, but also of the natural foundations of life, earth, water, air, climate and living beings, i.e. the preservation of the earth (or in the jargon of Christian peace and environmental initiatives of the 1980s: the preservation of creation) to make the world in the Arendtian sense possible. The question that arises in this relationship between earth and world is: do we want to approach the problems of the world and our relationship to creation with a liberal and instrumental way of thinking and acting, or do we want to regard plurality, politics, the world and nature/earth not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself, that means with a cosmopolitan, republican attitude?

This question prompts me to bring together two research directions that have a critical relationship to modernity: Hannah Arendt’s republicanism on one hand and the exploration of nature by the Enlightenment philosopher Alexander von Humboldt, which Andrea Wulf called the “invention of nature”<sup>4</sup> on the other. Both are critics of a utilitarian understanding of politics and nature, both are phenomenologists, both are intellectuals in the tradition of the European Enlightenment, and both are republicans. So far there have been initial considerations in this direction that require further deepening, to which this essay is intended to make a contribution.<sup>5</sup>

This brief encounter with Arendt and Humboldt is not intended to serve the purpose of creating a kind of republican biocentric philosophy, biocentric as opposed to the ways of thinking according to the Anthropocene. But this encounter can point to another aspect, namely a corresponding way of thinking, in which the worldviews of Arendt and Humboldt inspire each other. A strong republican citizenry would thus elevate sustainability to a decisive criterion in its relationship with nature, while Humboldt’s understanding of nature would radicalize this relationship by the assumption of a worldwide unity of man and nature.

In the following, I would first like to address Arendt’s critique of the modern understanding of nature as one of the foundations of her republican understanding and ask whether the preservation of the earth requires strong republican thinking, i.e. political thinking carried by sustainability and civic commitment. Then I would

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4 Andrea Wulf: *The Invention of Nature*, London: John Murray 2015.

5 See Peter Cannavò: Environmental Political Theory and Republicanism, In: *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*. Edited by Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg, Oxford University Press, 2016.

like to ask whether Humboldt's views of nature and the cosmos offer an understanding of nature adequate to republicanism, and finally I would like to consider Arendt's and Humboldt's ways of thinking and methods that correspond to republicanism and the cosmos.

## Arendt – Nature as a Process

Here, I would like to highlight two aspects of Arendt's analysis of nature: her critique of the alienation of the earth and the world by the natural sciences, and her critique of the understanding of nature as a process.

Most of the secondary literature on Arendt's understanding of nature deals little with the relationship between the environment and politics, with the exception of the publications of Hargis and Whiteside.<sup>6</sup> The latter emphasizes the close connection between the concepts of culture and nature, which Arendt regards as being much more closely connected with each other than her strict distinction in terms of definition suggests, namely as cultural preservation of nature.<sup>7</sup>

Referring to earth and world alienation, Arendt describes modern discoveries and inventions not as liberating and enriching progress, but as alienation from the earth through acceleration, as a reduction of distance *on* earth through distance *from* earth and, at the same time, as worldlessness due to the dual movement of expropriation and the process of accumulation. According to Arendt, "the Renaissance's new-awakened love for the earth and the world, with its rebellion against the rationalism of medieval scholasticism"<sup>8</sup> became the first victim of the modern age's triumphal world alienation. The new science went beyond the heliocentric view of the world in an effort to move around the universe with panoramic relativism and to conduct experiments with cosmic processes of evolution "unknown in the household of earthly

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6 Jill Hargis: Hannah Arendt's turn to the self and environmental responses to climate change paralysis, in: *Environmental Politics*, 2016, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 475–493, and Kerry H. Whiteside: Worldliness and Respect for Nature: An Ecological Appreciation of Hannah Arendt's Conception of Culture. In: *Environmental Values*, 1998, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 25–40.

7 Other studies deal with individual aspects of Arendt's work, see Anne Chapman: The Ways That Nature Matters: The World and the Earth in the Thought of Hannah Arendt, in: *Environmental Values* 2007, 16, no. 4, pp. 433–445; Paul Ott: World and Earth: Hannah Arendt and the Human Relationship to Nature, in: *Ethics, Place and Environment* 2009, vol. 12, no.1, pp 1–16; Janet Donohoe: Edmund Husserl, Hannah Arendt and a Phenomenology of Nature, in: *Phenomenology and the Primacy of the Political*, 2017, pp. 175–188; Waseem Yaqoob: The Archimedean point: Science and technology in the thought of Hannah Arendt, 1951–1963, In: *Journal of European Studies*, 2014, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 199–224.

8 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., p. 240.

nature". "And even at the risk of endangering the natural life process we expose the earth to universal, cosmic forces alien to nature's household"<sup>9</sup>.

The complicated relationship to nature did not first emerge with the capture of the Archimedean point, but originally with a modern natural science that does not deal with nature per se, but with its own questions, subordinating facts to laws that can prove everything. Man is reduced to "no more than a special case of organic life, ... to whom man's habitat – the earth, together with earthbound laws – is no more than a special borderline case of absolute, universal laws"<sup>10</sup>. Sensory perceptions, common sense and language are replaced by constructs and formulas. Arendt quotes Nils Bohr as saying that the aim is no longer "to augment and order"<sup>11</sup> human experience, but to discover what lies behind natural phenomena.

It is striking that Arendt understands world alienation not merely as a scientific process, but as a broad cultural process in which the natural sciences determine the prevailing views in religion, philosophy, historiography, and political theory. Hence, she asserts "the almost too precise congruity of modern man's world alienation with the subjectivism of modern philosophy"<sup>12</sup> – from the doubts of Descartes through Hobbes and English sensualism, empiricism and pragmatism to the existentialism and positivism of the twentieth century – accompanied by the withdrawal of people into their own selves. Hence it was not simply ideas about alienation from the world that moved philosophers, but concrete events, inventions and discoveries, to which they responded with doubts, axiomatic conclusions and a "catastrophic loss of judgement"<sup>13</sup>.

The second aspect, the interpretation of nature as a process, emerges as a result of technical progress according to Arendt. The interpretation of history was likewise affected by thinking in processes. Nature and history were both subjected to the flow of progress<sup>14</sup>, so that the procedural nature of examining them is inevitably constructed "(...) in the sense of the consuming process of life that is most immediately

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9 Ibid., p. 238.

10 Hannah Arendt: *The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man*, in: *Between Past and Future*. op. cit., p. 260.

11 Ibid., p. 261.

12 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., p. 248.

13 This phrase is included in the German version authorized by Arendt. Hannah Arendt *Natur und Geschichte*, in *Zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft, Übungen im politischen Denken I*, Munich Piper 1994, p. 68 "... die Verachtung der deutschen idealistischen Philosophie für den gesunden Menschenverstand hängt aufs engste mit Hegels ausdrücklicher Verachtung für die von Kant so gepriesene menschliche Urteilskraft, das eigentlich höchste Vermögen der Vernunft, zusammen." (The contempt of German idealistic philosophy for common sense is closely linked to Hegel's explicit contempt for the human power of judgement so praised by Kant, which is in fact the intellect's greatest asset.)

14 Hannah Arendt *Denktagebuch*, Munich 2002, XX, 8.

given to our experience”<sup>15</sup>. This life process corresponds to Arendt’s characterization of work in its processual, “destructive, devouring aspect of the laboring activity ... is visible only from the standpoint of the world”<sup>16</sup>. For Arendt as a phenomenologist it is particularly disturbing that a phenomenon or anything particular no longer appears “in the sense of an aspect or an example. It no longer shows itself at all, but is constantly consumed, ‘processed’”<sup>17</sup>. Finally, Arendt observes that progress in science and technology only came about because human beings intervened in interpersonal areas in a way that was previously only possible in the realm of history. Scientific and technical rather than political actors develop potential extermination processes and intervene in nature on a large scale with breeding, today with gene manipulation.<sup>18</sup>

According to Arendt, the difference between the ancient and the modern understanding of nature could not be greater. On the one hand, the immortality of nature and human deeds in ancient Greece, “which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves”<sup>19</sup>, and on the other hand the “world of things, which we already produce as transient, as parts of a gigantic production and consumption process, which makes them emerge and disappear ever faster” and which is itself surrounded by a transient nature, the disappearance of which takes place only at a slower pace – and this only as long as man leaves the natural processes of the emergence and disappearance of seas, continents and mountains to itself and does not intervene in an accelerating way. Immortality, in any case, has disappeared from the world surrounding human beings as well as from the nature surrounding the world. On its part, it is surrounded by a transient nature, the disappearance of which takes place only at a slower pace – and this only as long as human beings leave the natural processes of the origin and disappearance of seas, continents and mountains to themselves and do not intervene in an accelerating way. Immortality, in any case, has disappeared from the world surrounding man as well as from the nature surrounding the world.”<sup>20</sup>

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15 Hannah Arendt *Denktagebuch*, op. cit., XXII, 3.

16 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., p. 87.

17 Hannah Arendt *Denktagebuch*, op. cit., XXII, 3.

18 Hannah Arendt *Natur und Geschichte*, op. cit., p. 77.

19 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., p. 19.

20 Hannah Arendt *Natur und Geschichte*, op. cit., p. 76f. “die Welt der Dinge, die wir schon als vergängliche herstellen, als Teile eines gigantischen Produktions- und Konsumtionsprozesses, der sie immer schneller entstehen und vergehen lässt” und die “ihrerseits von einer vergänglichen Natur umgeben ist, deren Hinschwinden sich nur in einem langsameren Tempo vollzieht – und auch dies nur solange, als der Mensch die natürlichen Prozesse des Entstehens und Vergehens von Meeren, Kontinenten und Gebirgen sich selbst überlässt und nicht beschleunigend eingreift. Unvergänglichkeit jedenfalls ist aus der den Menschen umgeben-

These procedural interventions have assumed the character of irreversible actions, comparable to interpersonal actions.<sup>21</sup> In the course of time, the transience of the world of things and of nature<sup>22</sup> due to processes and interventions in the world and in nature, the consequences of which are irreversible<sup>23</sup>. In this process, the ability to act has become more and more the “exclusive prerogative” of natural scientists. “It seems only proper, that their deeds should eventually have turned out to have greater news value, to be of greater political significance than the administrative and diplomatic doings of most so-called statesmen.”<sup>24</sup>

Arendt’s critiques of loss of the earth and the world, of process thinking, of the endangerment of man and nature, and of the quasi unrestricted actions of scientists remain topical even in the face of newer technological developments – digitalization, biotechnology, and AI. At the same time, the exploitation, pollution and destruction of the living environment is gaining momentum.

In Arendt’s view, this process threatens to destroy man’s stature unless reason, public spirit and the ability to judge take centre stage again. The aim is to reverse the emancipation of the natural sciences from the “anthropocentric, i.e. truly humanistic, concerns”<sup>25</sup> that were not explained in detail but in a political rather than a conservative or romantic way. She ends her essays on “Nature and History” (in the German version) with the remark that she could or should not offer solutions in such an essay, but “perhaps contribute something to self-declaration and above all encourage to pursue the essence and the possibilities of action (...)”<sup>26</sup>; in other words, political action in the context of republicanism. Thus Arendt defends the freedom and curiosity of research, but at the same time considers “the layman and the humanist” indispensable in order “to judge what the scientist is doing because it concerns all men, and this debate must of course be joined by the scientists themselves insofar as they are fellow citizens.”<sup>27</sup> It should, however, be noted that humanism today is no longer an anthropocentric but a biocentric understanding of the world.

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den Welt wie aus der die Welt umgebenden Natur verschwunden.” (“... the world of things that we already produce as ephemeral, as parts of a gigantic production and consumption process that makes them come into being and pass away ever more quickly and that “for its part is surrounded by an ephemeral nature whose disappearance only takes place at a slower pace – and this too only as long as man leaves the natural processes of the emergence and passing away of seas, continents and mountains to themselves and does not intervene in an accelerating way. Imperishability, in any case, has disappeared from the world surrounding man as well as from the nature surrounding the world.”)

21 Hannah Arendt: *The Concept of History*, in *Between Past and Future*, op. cit., pp. 86–90.

22 Hannah Arendt *Natur und Geschichte*, op. cit., p. 72, 77.

23 *Ibid.*: p. 77f.

24 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., p. 206.

25 Hannah Arendt: *The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man*, op. cit., p. 260.

26 Hannah Arendt *Natur und Geschichte*, op. cit., p. 79.

27 Hannah Arendt: *The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man*, op. cit., p. 262.

I would like to add a third aspect, the role of nature in relation to the human necessities of life. Arendt touches on it only briefly with regard to the role of essential reproductive food, metabolism and life as the basic condition of working. And yet Arendt spoke about the beauty and indispensability of nature. Thus, when she turns to the world of phenomena, which not only constitutes the space of the political but according to the biologist Portmann, cited approvingly by Arendt, is also characteristic of all sentient beings, humans and animals who perceive phenomena and as phenomena of almost infinite diversity have the ability “to see and be seen, hear and be heard, touch and be touched”<sup>28</sup>. These phenomena are not only subject to a natural necessity, but in their manifestations largely an end in themselves.

Elsewhere, Arendt draws an emotional picture of nature interacting with humans. In a review of writer Adalbert Stifter’s relationship to nature in his novels and stories, she describes it as unparalleled in its pure joy, wisdom and beauty.<sup>29</sup> Arendt highlights the great beauty and “strangely innocent wisdom” of Stifter’s work and his incomparable ability to unfold a narrative landscape painting of the mountains of Bohemia. For Stifter, nature is reality. The people who live there are part of the common cycle with nature. They have a home there and are not confronted by a foreign society. “Our sense of homelessness in society and of alienation in nature, whose laws we feel will function only as long as we leave it alone (as Kafka once put it), are constantly contradicted by Stifter.”<sup>30</sup> The development of human nature in Stifter is the greatest good, according to Arendt, and trust the highest virtue as a prerequisite for this development. The narrative “Rock Crystal” demonstrates this reality, beauty, and innocent wisdom, when two children who get lost in a snowstorm in the mountains are rescued by the inhabitants of two villages, who until then had been estranged from each other.

Nature, the environment, technology, science, politics and philosophy are inseparable in Arendt’s view. As far-reaching as it is incomplete, her alternative sees the creation of world in the sense of inter-subjective worlds and the recovery of political action that subjects all human concerns to a deliberative process, including the contents of the sciences and their application. Her republican cosmopolitan approaches lend weight to our perception of the environmental/earth crisis as a crisis of liberal and autocratic governments in our world(s). Against this background, technical solutions promoted as “geotechnology”, such as the installation of reflective mirrors in space to minimize global warming, can be criticised not only in terms of feasibility,

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28 Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, New York: Harcourt, Brace Co. 1977, p. 19.

29 Hannah Arendt: Great Friend of Reality. Adalbert Stifter, in: *Hannah Arendt, Reflections on Literature and Culture*. Ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, Stanford University Press 2007, pp. 110–114. Cf. more detailed descriptions in chapter 18 and 19 in this volume: Desert and Oasis: Arendt Reads Stifter, and: Overcoming Inhuman Perspectives on Nature.

30 Hannah Arendt: *ibid.*, p. 113.

but above all as the continuation of an instrument-based creator mentality. Instead, we need to replace liberal thinking with environmental thinking.

The critique of “globalization” has priority here, for instance the ideas of Étienne Tassin, who described international relations as world-destructive, domesticated, privatized, and consumed.<sup>31</sup> According to Tassin, a globalized world in which the ecosystem of all things living, the cultural assets of all peoples and the pluralist communities of political actors must be preserved and enabled calls for a corresponding threefold effort in the form of ecology, ecumenism and cosmopolitanism in the interests of the environment, cultural assets and the meta-national sphere.

The already mentioned thesis of Kerry Whiteside that Arendt remarks on the role of culture in ancient Athens and Rome to derive the preservation of agri-culture as an alternative to the exploitation and destruction of nature<sup>32</sup> can also be found in the unity of town and country during the Renaissance, when culture was understood as the parallel preservation of culture, virtue and landscape. Arendt’s “worldly love of the Renaissance” expressed itself in the landscape as the cultural *topos* of Dante, Petrarch and Aeneas Sylvius before it was subjected to the new thinking of science and technology.

This worldly love of the Renaissance cannot be separated from the civic bourgeoisie’s love of political freedom and equality. In 1338/1339, Ambrogio Lorenzetti frescoed the government hall of Siena’s town hall, depicting good and bad governments and their impact on the life of the city and the surrounding countryside. The prosperous bourgeoisie of the time were aware that the wealth of their city and the wisdom of their rulers could only be secured through peace, harmony and equality under the rule of law, and the absence of selfish factions and damage to the common good.<sup>33</sup> These principles, known since Cicero, have shaped republicanism from that time up to Arendt and mean more than the absence of war; they enable the development of the virtue that Montesquieu called the principle of the republic and includes preservation of the land as agriculture and landscape.<sup>34</sup>

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31 Étienne Tassin: De la domination totale à la domination globale. Perspectives arendtiennes sur la mondialisation d’un point de vue cosmopolitique, in: Annabel Herzog (éd.): *Hannah Arendt. Le totalitarisme et la banalité du mal*. Paris: PUF 2011, p. 15.

32 Kerry H. Whiteside: Worldliness and Respect for Nature: an Ecological Application of Hannah Arendt’s Conception of Culture, in: *Environmental Values*, 1998, 7, p. 25–40.

33 Quentin Skinner: Ambrogio Lorenzetti: The Artist as Political Philosopher, in: *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 72, 1986, pp. 1–56.

34 We find here no evidence of a distinctly ecological policy of urban citizenship, but clearly a “knowledge of the indissoluble connection between city and country” as “a specific European cultural asset and thought” that needs to be revived, see Holger Magel: Ländlicher Raum – Wohin? Plädoyer für ein nachhaltiges Landmanagement und eine aktive Bürgergesellschaft, in *Allgemeine Vermessungsnachrichten (AVN)* 11/12, 2005, p. 390f.

We also find equality under the rule of law in the constitution of our Western societies. Here, however, the republic and liberal democracy are not only structurally in permanent conflict with each other (indivisible or divided sovereignty, rule of the people or of law, rule of virtue or principle of virtue, etc.), but also represent two historically competing currents in the tradition of Rousseau/Marx, on the one hand, and Montesquieu/Founding Fathers, on the other. The Principles of Corporate Social Responsibility, a UN initiative launched by Brazilian entrepreneurs in 2000 as “Global Compact” to protect the interests of workers, customers and the environment in a progressively globalized world, exemplifies the emergence of the principle of virtue at a time of active civil society in the style of Lorenzetti.<sup>35</sup> Here, the principle of socially responsible action is voluntarily adopted by numerous companies and social and political institutions around the world, transforming them in the process into corporate citizens, members of civil society. This assumption of multiple responsibilities in the context of republicanism can bring about an effective shift from anthropocentrism to biocentrism, encouraging people to “build better relationships with nature itself and with other people. Such an approach should be based, firstly, on a logic of respect for nature, sufficiency and interdependence, shared responsibility and fairness for all in search of an environmentally balanced environment; and, secondly, on the ethics of a citizenship that thinks globally and locally at the same time and insists on transparency and accountability in all environmental matters.”<sup>36</sup> Hence the special report of the *German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU)* in 2014 bears the title “Climate Protection as a World Citizen Movement”<sup>37</sup>.

## Humboldt – Nature as an Organism

An outstanding example of these recommendations can be found in Alexander von Humboldt’s understanding of nature and politics. Humboldt was filled with an irre-

35 Cf. chapter 9 in this volume: Sustainability – The Power of the ‘Unreasonable’.

36 David Bollier / Burns H. Weston Das Menschenrecht auf eine saubere Umwelt und die Renaissance der Commons, in Silke Helfrich (ed.) *Commons. Für eine neue Politik jenseits von Markt und Staat*, Bielefeld transcript 2015, p. 418. Similarly Jeremy Rifkin: “Geopolitics has always been based on the assumption that the environment is a giant battleground – a war of all against all – where we each fight with one another to secure resources to ensure our individual survival. Biosphere politics, by contrast, is based on the idea that the Earth is a living organism made up of interdependent relationships and that we each survive by stewarding the larger communities of which we are a part.” In: Jeremy Rifkin: *The Empathic Civilization. The Race to Global Consciousness in a World of Crisis*, New York: Polity Press 2010, p. 615.

37 For a critical discussion of this concept, see *GAIA 1 – 2015*, World Citizens Movement and Climate Protection, <https://www.oekom.de/zeitschriften/gaia/archive/archive/heft/678.html> (2023.7.5.)

pressible curiosity about nature: “I have a longing for *freedom* and distant journeys.” On his five-year journey through what are now the modern states of Venezuela, Cuba, Trinidad, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico and the United States, he collected numerous specimens, noted down his observations of flora and fauna, soils, mountains and climatic conditions. He took countless measurements of distances, altitudes and temperatures; he drew maps, but he was the opposite of the cool, technical surveyor suggested by Daniel Kehlmann’s novel *Measuring the World*<sup>38</sup>.

On the contrary, Humboldt found that nature spans the world like a single organism, which is why he spoke of *cosmos*. He saw nature as a living whole, not a “dead aggregate”<sup>39</sup>. His realization that vegetation in the earth’s northern hemisphere resembled the upper mountain regions of the Andes served to prove that even regions and heights remote from each other were connected, an insight he used to establish a geography of plants.

In contrast to Bacon, who regarded the world as created for man, or Descartes, who saw animals effectively as automata<sup>40</sup>, Humboldt witnessed countless interdependencies and established “how many things are connected with the existence of a single plant”. He discovered the “principle of a keystone species (...) almost 200 years before the concept was named”<sup>41</sup>.

“The phrase *physical description of the world* that I use here is modelled on the long since commonly used physical description of the earth. The expansion of the contents, the depiction of the natural whole from distant nebulae to the climatic spread of the organic tissues that colour our cliffs, make the introduction of a new word necessary.”<sup>42</sup> It is *cosmos* in the Greek understanding of the world order that Humboldt was eager to permeate: “My main impulse was the endeavour to conceive physical things in their general context and nature as a whole, moved and enlivened by inner forces, (...) so that without serious inclination to the knowledge of the individual, all great and universal world-views can only be an airy vision.”<sup>43</sup> His attempt to spread *cosmos* throughout numerous volumes of the same name towards the end of his life was not fully crowned with success. “We are far from a time when it might be possible to concentrate all our sensuous views on the unity of the concept of nature.”<sup>44</sup>

It is this *cosmos* in the Greek understanding of the world order that Humboldt was keen to investigate. His idea of a multifaceted unity of nature also embraced

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38 “What speaks to the soul ... escapes our measurements”, see: Andrea Wulf, op. cit., p. 72.

39 Andrea Wulf, op. cit., p. 88.

40 Andrea Wulf, op. cit., p. 59.

41 Andrea Wulf, op. cit., p. 74.

42 Alexander von Humboldt *Kosmos*. vol 1, Kindle, position 842.

43 Ibid., position 26.

44 Ibid., position 923.

people in their exchange with nature. He was fully interested in the social and political conditions of life, thus distinguishing him as a republican, “a convinced republican at the Prussian court”<sup>45</sup>. He thus describes the negative consequences of tree clearing and subsequent soil erosion, and criticizes slavery and oppression. In his extensive studies on what is now Mexico, he detailed the social and political situation of the Indians and of African slaves, as well as the hatred that prevailed between the various social classes and seriously hindered the just economic development of the country. At the same time, he boasted that the Toltecs had “a far more perfect solar year than the Greeks and Romans”<sup>46</sup>.

It was not only part of his ethos as a scientist, but also part of his humanist convictions that made him determine that it was up to travelers who witnessed grievances and oppressions “to bring the laments of the wretched to the ears of those who have the power to assuage them”<sup>47</sup>. When he visited the United States following his stay in Central and South America, he voiced his criticism of the slave economy to President Jefferson. He thanked Jefferson after his visit: “I have had the good fortune to see the first Magistrate of this great republic with the simplicity of a philosopher”<sup>48</sup>, a message that was followed by years of correspondence. Humboldt admired the newly formed republic for not having taken the fatal course of the French Revolution. He was sceptical instead about the future of independence movements in Central and South America, since the strong cultural imprint of feudalism and the clergy coupled with lack of opportunity to cultivate republican practices bore the risk of ending in tyranny rather than a republic. And in 1854 he complained to Varnhagen about the decline of republicanism in the USA: “(...) the whole thing gives me the sad impression that freedom is simply a mechanism in the element of usefulness, refining little there to stimulate the spiritual and the comfortable, which is supposed to be the purpose of political freedom. (...) Hence indifference to slavery. But the United States is a Cartesian whirlwind, sweeping everything away, tediously leveling.”<sup>49</sup>

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45 Ottmar Ette *Das Mobile des Wissens. Alexander von Humboldts Foren der Kulturen und das Humboldt-Forum*. In Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (ed.) *Zukunftsmodell Humboldt*, 2007, p. 9.

46 Alexander von Humboldt *Versuch über den politischen Zustand des Königreichs Neu-Spanien, Darmstädter Ausgabe*, Vol. 4, 2008, p. 164.

47 Cf. Andrea Wulf, op. cit., p. 204.

48 Gerhard Casper: A Young Man from “ultima Thule” Visits Jefferson: Alexander von Humboldt in Philadelphia and Washington, in: *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, September 2011, Vol. 155, no. 3, p. 258.

49 Humboldt an Varnhagen von Ense, 31 July 1854, in Alexander von Humboldt *Über die Freiheit des Menschen. Auf der Suche nach Wahrheit*, ed. by Manfred Otto, Frankfurt/M. S. Fischer Verlag 1999, p. 181f.

## ***Cosmos and Republic as a Thinking Space***

Such a thinking space does not only exist as a place of exchange of views, but is characterized by Arendt's critique of the natural science disinterest in world and nature, and Humboldt's views of nature and the cosmos. Both differ completely from abstract, surveying, instrumental thinking. What is the object of our thinking? was the question Arendt asked herself, to which she replied: "Experience! Nothing else! And if we lose the ground of experience, then we get into all kinds of theory."<sup>50</sup>

For Humboldt, Hegel's approach to the world or even the cosmos was unbearable for its lack of vision. "A forest of ideas is certainly in that Hegel (...) though for someone like me who is stuck insect-like on the ground and with a very different nature, an abstract assertion of purely false facts and views about America and the Indian world becomes liberty-robbing and frightening. But at the same time I don't ignore the greatness."<sup>51</sup>

Humboldt is the first scientist to produce scientific results in images; pictorial representation is part of the cognitive process, not mere illustration. And since the perception of external nature and inner human nature not only takes place in concepts or in an unemotional outlook and unemotional thinking, but in the world of feelings as well, Humboldt's work is deliberately marked by sensual impressions that arise while observing nature. His *Views of Nature* is a "scientific book full of lyrical passages. For Humboldt, prose was as important as the content, and he did not allow his publisher to change a single syllable in order to preserve the 'melody' of his sentences"<sup>52</sup>. He emphasized "the combination of a literary and a purely scientific purpose, the desire to simultaneously engage the imagination and enrich life with ideas by multiplying knowledge"<sup>53</sup>.

In his book on what is now Mexico, he introduced his geographical account with an impressive description of a sandstorm. "I have tried, always authentically describing, characterizing, even trying to be scientifically truthful, without entering the arid region of knowledge."<sup>54</sup>

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50 Hannah Arendt *Ich will verstehen, Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk*. Ed. Ursula Ludz, Munich Piper 1996, p. 79

51 Humboldt to Varnhagen von Ense, 1 July 1837, in Alexander von Humboldt *Über die Freiheit des Menschen*, op. cit., p. 180.

52 Andres Wulf, op. cit., p. 132.

53 Ottmar Ette Schreiben in der Moderne, in *AvH – Aufbruch in die Moderne*, ed. Ottmar Ette et al., Berlin 2001, p. 49.

54 *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Varnhagen von Ense aus den Jahren 1827 bis 1858*. Nebst Auszügen aus Varnhagen's Tagebüchern und Briefen von Varnhagen und Andern an Humboldt. Ed. By Ludmilla Assing, Leipzig F.A. Brockhaus 1860, p. 23.

This prompted Humboldt researcher Ottmar Ette to summarize Humboldt's method as transdisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary.<sup>55</sup>

Arendt's thinking has been variously discussed in terms of her essayistic, open-minded thinking, which she herself called "exercises in political thinking", her description of semantic changes in concepts and ways of thinking between the antiquity and modernity, therefore the title she gave to a collection of her essays *Between Past and Future*, her use of linguistic imagery and metaphors to designate the new, of irony, sharpness and laughter, e.g. in the characterization of Eichmann, the reduction of essentialists to a minimum, which she called "The Human Condition" in order to display intersubjective phenomena, the use of poetry and literature in the reproduction of moods and experiences of political consequence typical of the time, so in her books *Rahel Varnhagen*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Men in Dark Times*, and *The Hidden Tradition*, of theatrical, atmospheric scenes (about Anton Schmidt, who had rescued persecuted Jews, in the Eichmann trial, or the recitation of Pasternak's poems by the audience from memory when he dropped his manuscript at a rare public reading in the USSR, mentioned in her essay on the Hungarian Revolution), of imagination as a prerequisite of judgment, and the critique and redefinition of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* as joint action and thinking / judging in public<sup>56</sup> These thinking processes are closely linked to emotional movements (writing with *ira et studio*, laughter, pure joy, wisdom and beauty, the "basic experience of abandonment", giving meaning and understanding, etc.). Nor should the transfer of Kantian aesthetic judgment to political judgement be interpreted by any means as de-emotionalization, since "disinterested pleasure" underlies the process of judgment, and the appearance of the *who*, as we saw in the reference to Portmann, has an aesthetic component (the beautiful gesture, ugly behaviour). Finally, Arendt's reference to Solomon's "understanding heart" in her essay on "Understanding and Politics"<sup>57</sup>, which she used while investigating the conditions for judgment before embarking on her writings on Kant, shows that she was not seeking an abstract formula for judgment, but

55 Ottmar Ette *Unterwegs zu einer Weltwissenschaft? Alexander von Humboldts Weltbegriffe und die transregionalen Studien*, in *HiN*, vol. 7, No. 13, 2006, p. 10.

56 Cf. chapter 10 in this volume: Horror and Laughter – Arendt, Tabori, Borowski. Also: Volker M. Heins: *Reasons of the Heart: Weber and Arendt on Emotion in Politics*, in: *The European Legacy*, October 2007, vol. 12 no. 6, pp. 715–728; Michalinos Zembylas: *Hannah Arendt's political thinking on emotions and education: implications for democratic education*, in: *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, August 2018; Barbara Hahn: *Hannah Arendt – Leidenschaft, Menschen und Bücher*, Berlin: Berlinverlag 2005; Marie Luise Knott: *Verlernen: Denkwege bei Hannah Arendt*, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz 2011; Maria Robaszkiewicz: *Übungen im politischen Denken. Hannah Arendts Schriften als Einleitung der politischen Praxis*, Wiesbaden Springer 2017; Maike Weißpflug *Die Kunst, politisch zu denken*, Berlin Matthes & Seitz 2019.

57 Hannah Arendt: *Understanding and Politics*, in: *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn, New York: Schocken 1994, p. 322.

rather the possibility of understanding as meaning. Meaningfulness through narratives and the perception of different perspectives and experiences requires the whole person, as the Enlightenment essayist and diplomat Melchior Grimm put it: “The prerequisite for a distinct and mature taste is having a sharp mind, a sensitive soul and a righteous heart.”<sup>58</sup>

What finally distinguishes this space of thought is a common cosmopolitanism. In Arendt’s work it finds its basis in the qualitatively interpersonal, active plurality as the starting point, which is followed as a second step of thought by the institutionalization appropriate to this plurality in the form of a federation.<sup>59</sup> Finally, in a third step, this plurality and federation requires the appropriate form of judgement, the extended power of judgement adopted by Kant, the location of which is cosmopolitan. It presupposes that the judges leave the exclusivity of the European or Western horizon and judge from a cosmopolitan location, in contrast to Hegel’s pejorative critique of Chinese philosophy.<sup>60</sup>

Humboldt’s view of the world is one that not only encompasses nature as a global organism, but also, according to Ette, characterises the world as a commonality of world trade, world history, world view and world consciousness. What Alexander von Humboldt developed on the level of world knowledge was represented by his brother Wilhelm, with whom he constantly corresponded, on the level of linguistic knowledge, so that it applies to both that “the dialogical principle is central not just to Humboldt’s theory of language but also to his philosophical anthropology, and it has a direct political relevance. ... The diversity of languages and their comparative study is not just essential to our understanding of our own languages as well as those of others; it is intrinsic to the nature of language as such. Translation is thus a privileged route to cultural as well as linguistic communication.”<sup>61</sup>

From this cosmopolitan perspective two things follow: first, to leave the preferred regional location without abandoning it, but to subject it to critical assessment within the framework of many different points of view. Second, to adopt the standpoint of cosmopolitan political action. It is a different matter whether one looks at international institutions such as the UN Security Council from a regional or national perspective, at international organizations such as the courts of criminal justice, at rules such as the Responsibility to Protect and challenges such as climate change and the extinction of species, or from changing standpoints in the world. Then we will find that these institutions are not only hopeful approaches, but are

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58 Melchior Grimm *Paris zündet die Lichter an. Literarische Korrespondenz*, Leipzig Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung 1977, p. 121.

59 Cf. chapter 13 in this volume: Federalism – A Hidden Treasure.

60 Cf. chapter 17 in this volume: Elements of Cosmopolitanism – and its Handicaps.

61 John Walker: Wilhelm von Humboldt and Dialogical Thinking, in: *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, January 2017, vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 83–94.

still far too weak instruments with regard to a necessary, future cosmopolitan policy, in which regional standpoints are not necessarily limited to its regions.

## Conclusion

We can now conclude from what has been said, that Arendt's and Humboldt's self and world relationships seem to be radical, less in their open or implicit criticism of the natural sciences, but above all by their strong rejection of any kind of instrumentalization of men and nature. The preservation of nature is not missing in Arendt's statements that the meaning of politics is freedom, and that the realization of human plurality is the basis of politics and freedom; at the same time, Humboldt's statement of the unity of man and nature includes a republican respect for mankind. Both perspectives exclude the exploitation of man and nature, in open or implicit form like cheap promises or technical solutions, such as solar sails in space to prevent the global rise in temperature.

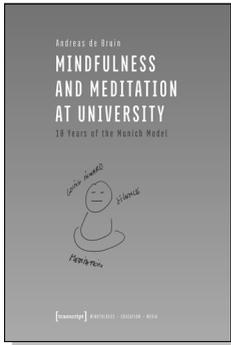
It is no coincidence that Arendt and Humboldt have a peculiar way of writing that cannot be separated from their perspective of thinking. The question that can not be further examined here is to what extent a republicanism that is oriented towards sustainability and an Arendtian action as an end in itself expresses itself in its own way of thinking and writing. Weaving the thread of Humboldt and Arendt further would not only bring *cosmos* and *republic* together, but also Grimm's unity of judgment, feeling and prudence in a way that overcomes opposition and disciplinary boundaries, nature and culture, reason and feeling, science and aesthetics. This means that *cosmos* and *republic* could trigger a common environmental philosophy and environmental aesthetics that goes beyond a natural philosophy and natural aesthetics confined to external nature.<sup>62</sup>

And finally, we have seen that cosmopolitanism, in the face of global problems, becomes an indispensable place of thought and politics, to which one arrives with Humboldt from nature and with Arendt from human plurality and Kant's *erweiterte Denkungsart*. All this opens up further reflection on a republican-biocentric perspective.

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62 Cf. for further reflections Gernot Böhme: *Leib. Die Natur, die wir selbst sind*, Berlin 2019, p. 41.

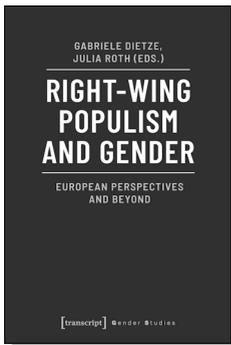
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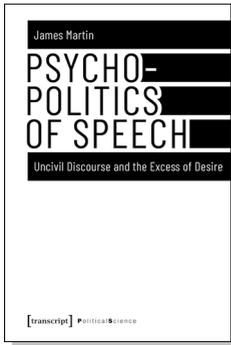
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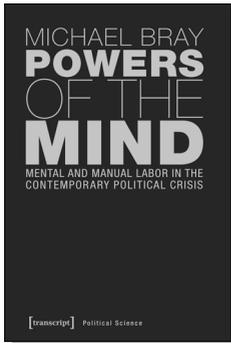
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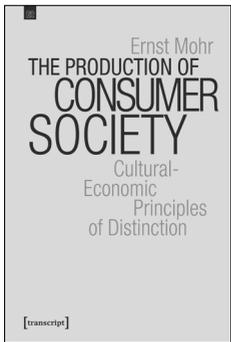
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