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Author(s): David Sorkin

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WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF SELF-FORMATION (*BILDUNG*), 1791-1810

BY DAVID SORKIN*

Wilhelm von Humboldt holds a conspicuous place among the early progenitors of German liberalism, for in addition to being an able theoretician he was also an historical figure whose career left its imprint on German thought and culture: in the two decades from 1790 to 1810, Humboldt made a crucial contribution to the development and canonization of the German conception of self-formation or self-cultivation (*Bildung*). In his *Limits of State Action* (1791-92), Humboldt proposed the reduction of state power to the barest minimum in order to insure freedom for individual self-cultivation, and during a sixteen-month tenure as Head of the Section for Religion and Education in the Ministry of the Interior (February 1809 to June 1810) he revamped the Prussian educational system in accord with the neo-humanist conception of *Bildung*.

Because Humboldt was both theoretician and practical politician, he has been the subject of scholarly controversy: Was his 1809-1810 reform of the educational system consistent with his 1791-1792 political theory based on *Bildung*? Could the reform of education by the state be compatible with a theory that advocated private education free from state interference? Liberal historians from Haym to Meinecke have maintained Humboldt's consistency, arguing that his reforms of 1809-1810 were entirely in consonance with Stein's program for the overhaul of the Prussian state. Revisionist historians who assert Humboldt's inconsistency cite nationalist fervor as the cause.¹

The matter of Humboldt's consistency, albeit important in itself, has larger significance since it bears on the relationship of the intelligentsia to the Prussian state. Humboldt's 1809-1810 theory of *Bildung*

* I would like to thank Martin Malia, Anthony Grafton, Martin Jay, and the Editors of JHI for their assistance in preparing this essay.

¹ For the liberal view see Rudolf Haym, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Berlin, 1865), 249-82; Friedrich Meinecke, *The Age of German Liberation*, trans. Helmut Fischer & Peter Paret (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976), 54-58; idem, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, trans. Robert Kimber (Princeton, 1970), chaps. 3 & 8; Franz Schnabel, *Deutsche Geschichte im 19. Jahrhundert*, 4 vols. (Freiburg, 1929-1947), I, 408-57; O. Vossler, "Humboldts Idee der Universität," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 178 (1954), 251-68; Karl-Ernst Jeismann, *Das preussische Gymnasium in Staat und Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart, 1974), 142-43, 295f.; Clemens Menze, *Die Bildungsreform Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Hanover, 1975), 67-73. As advocates of Humboldt's inconsistency see Siegfried Kaehler, *Humboldt und der Staat* (Munich, 1927), 211-49; J. A. Rantzaus, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Der Weg seiner geistigen Entwicklung* (Munich, 1939), 78-81; Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom* (Chicago, 1957), 170f;

has been considered the doctrine that legitimized the alliance of the intelligentsia and the state through the university. If Humboldt was indeed inconsistent, can his metamorphosis be seen as representative of the capitulation of the liberal intelligentsia to the Prussian state? Was that capitulation the inevitable result of the concept of *Bildung*?²

Humboldt's biography turns on a conflict between training and character: although destined for a career in state service, he was irresistibly drawn toward self-cultivation.³ This conflict represents a conjunction of individual psychological causes on the one side with a cultural and historical climate on the other. Humboldt's character can be traced to his boyhood (his father died when he was twelve and his mother and private tutors remained distant) and to an overwhelming need, as W. H. Bruford has pointed out, for self-mastery and self-control, for the "primacy of the will" and "holding life at a distance."⁴ Despite these unique causes, Humboldt's character and disposition reflected those of his age: one need only recall Goethe and Schiller to take the most obvious examples. The larger historical roots of this general emphasis on the individual and self-cultivation are to be found in the deterioration of the estate structure and the search for new forms of sociability (witness the proliferation of secret societies, lodges, and salons), in the increasing power of the absolutist state and the growth of a bureaucratic intelligentsia, as well as in the cultural movements of the period, the sentimental turn of the late Enlightenment followed by neo-humanism and romanticism.⁵ This historical

von Humboldt, *Limits of State Action*, ed. J. W. Burrow (Cambridge, 1969), ix (hereafter cited as *Limits*). A psychologized leftist version of the same argument is presented in Peter Berglar, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg, 1970), 79-101. Recent German discussions of Humboldt's internal consistency have been inadequate: Jeismann bases his argument solely on Humboldt's changing view of the state (142-43), and Menze fails to consider Humboldt's early political works (133f). Paul B. Sweet avoids the problem by asserting that Humboldt was less attached to his ideas on education than to other ideas developed in the *Limits of State Action* and, in addition, was not as antipathetic to the state as scholars have maintained; see his *Wilhelm von Humboldt: A Biography*, 2 vols. (Columbia, Ohio, 1978-80) I, 108, II, 20. Charles McClelland attributes Humboldt's inconsistency to his belief in the state as a moral entity and his indifference to the university as an institution; see his *State, Society & University in Germany* (Cambridge, U.K., 1980), 141-44.

² Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the Germany Mandarins* (Cambridge, U.K., 1969), 116-18.

³ This is the basic premise of Kaehler, *Humboldt und der Staat*. In this regard also Meinecke, "Humboldt und der Staat," in *Staat und Persönlichkeit* (Berlin, 1933), 81-97, and Sweet, *Humboldt: A Biography*, II, 254.

⁴ *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation* (Cambridge, U.K., 1975), 1-28.

⁵ For the estate structure and the intelligentsia see Hans Gerth, *Bürgerliche Intelligenz um 1800* (Göttingen, 1976) & Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy* (Boston, 1966); for theories of sociability Reinhard Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise* (Freiburg, 1959); Thomas Nipperdey, "Verein als Soziale Struktur" in *Geschichtswissenschaft und Vereinswesen*, ed. Hartmar Bockmann (Göttingen, 1972); for the Prussian system and the cultural movements Henri Brunschwig, *Enlightenment and Romanticism*, trans. Frank Jelinek (Chicago, 1974).

climate reinforced Humboldt's disposition and served as a vehicle for his development. The cultural movements in particular adjusted and articulated his response to the historical situations he experienced. And because this experience, as well as the central conflict of his life (i.e., between his training and character), had decidedly political components, the cultural choices Humboldt made must also be treated as potential political categories.

Humboldt was educated for state service: his childhood tutors introduced him to the *Aufklärung*, and the tutors who prepared him for university studies were eminent representatives of the last wave of the Berlin Enlightenment.⁶ After a semester at Frankfurt-on-the-Oder Humboldt studied at Göttingen (1788-89), the intellectual center of political science favored by aristocrats headed for government careers. Yet Göttingen was also a center of the neo-humanist revival, and Humboldt found a home for self-cultivation in the seminar of Christian G. Heyne (1729-1812), the classical philologist.⁷ Humboldt's inward turn also found a sympathetic response in the cult of sensibility and nascent romanticism that swept Berlin in the late 1780s. With Henriette Herz, one of the salon Jewesses, Humboldt formed a *Tugendbund* (virtue society) in 1787, a secret society of three women and three men dedicated to mutual moral improvement. Although Humboldt tired of the *Tugendbund* in little more than a year, he met his future wife when she was an aspiring applicant to the society, and the correspondence of the first years of their marriage preserves the language and tone of the society.⁸ During his years at Göttingen Humboldt made numerous trips through Germany to meet famous people, forming close friendships with, among others, Georg Forster and Fritz Jacobi, each representing a strain of incipient romanticism. These friendships, the *Tugendbund*, his close reading of Kant, and his other philological and philosophical studies at Göttingen encouraged him to reject the unalloyed *Aufklärung* education of his youth and to question his anticipated career in the Prussian bureaucracy. Yet Humboldt did enter state service (1790) and enjoyed the prospects of a brilliant career. Within the year, however, he began to have doubts about his work since he found no satisfaction in it and was unable to respect those who had.⁹ His wife encouraged him to retire, and so after they were married, in June 1791, they took up residence at her family's country estate.

⁶ Friedrich Schaffstein, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Frankfurt, 1952), 7-10. For other tutors see Eduard Spranger, *Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesens*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen, 1960), 21.

⁷ W. H. Bruford, *Germany in the 18th Century* (Cambridge, 1971), 235-71.

⁸ W. H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation*, 9.

⁹ Schaffstein, *Humboldt*, 36-39; Sweet, *op. cit.*, I, 40-43, 54-57.

The *Limits of State Action* is the first major product of Humboldt's retirement into private life. The essay has traditionally been seen as both a defense of his retirement and his response to the French Revolution. As in his fragmentary essay of 1791, "Ideas on State Constitutions Elicited by the French Revolution,"¹⁰ Humboldt embraces the ideals of political freedom but rejects revolution in favor of a stable model of organic development, anticipating Burke in fearing the unforeseen consequences of actions that depart from that model.¹¹ While his retirement and the French Revolution undoubtedly provided the immediate impetus for the essay, the central idea that informs it antedates both. In a passage from his essay, "On Religion," written between August 1788 and July 1789, Humboldt enters a plea for a reorientation of political thinking following the example of Rousseau's pedagogy:

When will man finally cease to regard the outward consequences of action with greater esteem than the inward spiritual frame of mind from which they flow; when will someone appear who will be for legislation what Rousseau was for education, who will withdraw the point of vantage from the outward physical results to the inward cultivation (*Bildung*) of men?¹²

The *Limits of State Action* aims precisely at this reorientation of political thought.

Structured around Rousseau's dichotomy between the inward development of man and the outward action of the citizen, the *Limits* asserts the political sovereignty of man's inward development, his *Bildung*, which depends upon a specific image of man derived by Humboldt from an intensive reading of Leibniz in 1788-1789.¹³ Humboldt envisages man as a dynamic organism uniquely characterized by his energy: "Energy (*Kraft*) appears to me to be the first and unique virtue of mankind."¹⁴ An individual's development depends upon finding appropriate outlets for his energy so that he can engage in activity by means of which he realizes his potentialities and increases his abilities. One essential condition for such activity is freedom: one must be assured of the freedom to act for oneself, that is, to be self-reliant. A second essential condition is "social intercourse": one develops through the voluntary interchange of one's individuality

¹⁰ *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, 15 vols. (Berlin, 1903-20), I, 77-85. (Hereafter cited as *GS*).

¹¹ *Limits*, 10. (*Op. cit.*, n. 1 above.)

¹² *GS*, I, 75. All translations from Humboldt, except from the *Limits*, are mine.

¹³ Ernst Lichtenstein, *Zur Entwicklung des Bildungsbegriffs von Meister Eckhart bis Hegel* (Heidelberg, 1966), 22-25. For a full treatment see Clemens Menze, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Lehre und Bild vom Menschen* (Rätigen bei Dusseldorf, 1965).

¹⁴ *Limits*, 72.

with that of others. Self-formation, in other words, requires social bonds¹⁵ :

And indeed the whole tenor of the ideas and arguments unfolded in this essay might fairly be reduced to this, that while they would break all fetters in human society, they would attempt to find as many new social bonds as possible. The isolated man is no more able to develop than the one who is fettered.¹⁶

The first condition, the pursuit of freedom, is the essay's over-weening concern. To Humboldt, freedom means limiting the absolutist Frederician state by reducing its power to the minimum required to guarantee the internal and external security of the state. The creation of social bonds implies not merely a reform of the absolutist state but also a basic alteration in the relations between the state and individual, enough to confute the doctrine of Frederick's political ideal, succinctly described as advocating that:

No consideration of tradition, hierarchy or privilege should impede the comprehension and concentration of political power in a single system which brought all the citizens into an equally direct connection with the head of the state.¹⁷

In attempting to transform this relationship of state to individual, Humboldt was motivated not simply by antipathy for the Prussian state but also by the imperatives of his theoretical construct.

By adopting his image of individuals from Leibniz, Humboldt inherited, *mutatis mutandis*, the central problem of Leibniz's system. Leibniz had predicated his concept of individual monads of energy on the metaphysical presupposition of the "pre-established harmony" of the universe. Only with such a concept of metaphysical harmony could Leibniz account for the interaction of the individual monads—though they "have no windows"—as well as maintain a notion of a unified world. Humboldt's theory of *Bildung* requires a similar concept of harmony, for *Bildung* requires interchange between individuals. Yet for Humboldt that harmony can be neither metaphys-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32, 98. Humboldt's emphasis on social bonds has largely been neglected. Why this is so is difficult to say. Certainly the same issue has received little treatment in the scholarship on neo-humanism as a whole. Paul Sweet has called attention to a terminological confusion—the equation of social bonds with the "national community" or "*Volksgemeinschaft*"—which could have contributed to this neglect at least in the last four decades. See Sweet, "Young Humboldt's Writings Reconsidered," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34 (1973), 480-81. Social bonds are also important for Humboldt's later theory of the development of language. For a perceptive discussion see Menze, *Die Bildungsreform*, 38-46.

¹⁶ *Limits*, 98.

¹⁷ Krieger, *German Idea of Freedom*, *op. cit.*, 23.

ical nor presupposed: it is a political and social harmony which must be achieved in the modern state.

For Humboldt a pre-established harmony did exist in ancient Greece where person and citizen were one. The political constitution of the city-state paradoxically served as the instrument of this unit: because it was minimal, governing few areas of life, it was bolstered by extending politics into private life through an education aimed at producing loyal citizens. Such political molding of private life might have had a deleterious effect, according to Humboldt, since by influencing man's "inmost being" (*inneres Dasein*) it might have irreversibly deformed the inhabitants of the Greek state. The opposite occurred, however. Because the *polis* sought "happiness in virtue," it promoted the harmonious development of the individual; in aiming to "train up temperate and energetic [*kraftvolle*] citizens," it gave a "higher impulse to their whole spirit and character."¹⁸

The Frederician state cannot emulate the *polis*; it cannot be the instrument of harmony, Humboldt argues, for its aim is too eudaemonistic. By attending to man's well-being and his property, his ease and comfort, the modern state suppresses man's energies; it thwarts man's personal growth in favor of obtaining a productive and obedient citizen. The modern state must therefore be restricted to a negative function, providing merely the outward conditions of freedom for individual development:

the State must wholly refrain from every attempt to operate directly or indirectly on the morals and character of the nation. . . . Everything calculated to promote such a design, and particularly all special supervision of education, religion, sumptuary laws, etc., lies wholly outside the limits of its legitimate activity.¹⁹

By reducing the state's powers, Humboldt met the first condition for self-formation: the freedom of the individual. He never succeeds, however, in delineating a program that satisfies the second condition of forming the social bonds essential to the free interchange of individuals. Humboldt does recognize the salutary effect of intermediate institutions and corporations, and incisively analyzes the situation that results from the failure to create such institutions:

Instead of men grouping themselves into communities in order to discipline and develop their powers . . . they actually sacrifice their powers to their possessions. . . . Under such a system, we have not so much the individual members of a nation living united in the bonds of a civil compact: but isolated subjects living in a relation to the State, or rather to the spirit which prevails in its government. . . .²⁰

¹⁸ *Limits*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

Yet this hope for such institutions remains utopian. He knows neither where to locate them within the extant relations between the individual and the state nor how they could develop. In fact, at the same time that Humboldt desires such institutions, he is unable to alter his own conception of the state and the individual citizens as the sole parties to the political process.²¹ The crux of the Leibnizian heritage, the harmony necessary for interaction, remains unresolved.

In 1809-1810, Humboldt found the means to satisfy the second condition of *Bildung*. He endeavored to establish the educational system itself, with the University of Berlin at its pinnacle, as the institutional setting in which the free interchange of varied personalities can occur. This resolution depended upon Humboldt's new concept of the nation.

During the years between 1791-1792 and 1809-1810, Humboldt had indeed "discovered" the nation, as the proponents of his inconsistency assert, both theoretically, as the mediating concept between the individual and humanity, and personally, as a concrete entity in his own life. In his essay on the "Decline and Fall of the Greek Free States (1807)," Humboldt had declared that the energy (*Kraft*) and ultimately the *Bildung* of the individual are dependent upon that of the nation.²² At the same time, he realized that he himself was immutably German and that he felt emotionally attached to Prussia.²³ This incipient nationalism did not lead him, however, to betray his avowed principles but instead provided him with the means for their theoretical resolution as well as the possibility for their concrete implementation.²⁴

Humboldt saw a way beyond the state's unmediated relationship to the individual, and his reform of the Prussian educational system aspired to return control of education to the nation. If the nation were made responsible for education, and if freedom prevailed within the educational institutions themselves, he thought, then the nation would develop an associational life in and around the educational system that would foster the interchange requisite to *Bildung*. But this could occur, Humboldt held, only when his own agency, the Section for Education, had ceased to exist.²⁵ The state, as he pointedly remarked, was

²¹ For example, *Limits*, 94.

²² *GS*, X., 75.

²³ *Wilhelm und Caroline von Humboldt in ihren Briefen*, ed. Anna Sydow, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1906-13), III, 375, 407.

²⁴ Krieger, *op. cit.*, 169, points up the instrumental role of the nation for Humboldt.

²⁵ *GS*, XIII 219-220, Menze analyzes these organizational arrangements as Humboldt's adaptation of his *Bildung* ideas to Stein's reform, demonstrating the mutual dependence of *Bildungsverwaltung* and *Bildungspolitik*. Menze thereby discounts the elements of Humboldt's internal continuity—a tendency reinforced by his failure (above Note 1) to discuss *Bildung* in regard to Humboldt's early political thought. See Menze, *Die Bildungsreform*, 67-119.

“not an educational, but a legal institution [*kein Erziehungs-, sondern ein Rechtsinstitut*].”²⁶ The end of state intervention would mark the true beginning of national association.

Humboldt outlined a three-point program for the educational system. First, the nation was to assume financial responsibility for the schools. On March 4, 1809, some two weeks after entering office, Humboldt wrote enthusiastically to his wife, “I have a grand plan to have the schools funded exclusively by the nation.”²⁷ By shifting responsibility to the nation, Humboldt hoped that the citizenry would become engaged. He envisioned the revival of the “good old communal spirit [*alte fromme Gemeingeist*]” through the creation of “school societies.”²⁸ In the same spirit, Humboldt proposed that the University of Berlin have its own endowment of former crown lands and become financially independent, thereby winning the active participation of the people who would then consider it to be a national institution rather than a mere appendage of the state.²⁹ The state should endeavor to act only “negatively,” Humboldt argued in the language of the *Limits*, and allow the people to act positively. In short, the state should enable the citizen “to educate himself.”³⁰

Humboldt proposed, in the second instance, that the educational barriers inimical to the unity of the nation be removed; education should serve the person and not the citizen. The special institutions that segregated the estates and trained students for specific functions were to be terminated. In a series of memoranda, Humboldt advocated the abolition of military schools catering to the nobility, and opposed the creation of special “middle schools” for adolescents either uninterested or financially unable to undertake university studies. Nobles and commoners, future scholars and future artisans were to attend the same school: “The organization of the schools pays heed to no caste, to no single corporation, and not even to the scholar.”³¹

This educational egalitarianism implemented the fundamental Rousseauist principle of the *Limits*: a person is more than a citizen. In so doing, it opposed the pedagogical policy of the Frederician state which had rested on the concept of education by estate, one aspect of a general policy defending society’s hierarchy.³² Yet it served the

²⁶ *GS*, X, 100.

²⁷ *Wilhelm und Caroline von Humboldt in ihren Briefen*, III, 106.

²⁸ *GS*, XIII, 289.

²⁹ *GS*, X, 143-52.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

³¹ *GS*, XIII, 188.

³² Krieger, *op. cit.*, 21-46; Rudolf Vierhaus, “Bildung” in *Geschichtlicher Grundbegriffe*, ed. Otto Brunner, 4 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972-), 511-15. McClelland’s assertion that Humboldt was an educational elitist concerned only with a minority of “geniuses” cannot be sustained. See *State, Society and University*, 132-40. Sweet persuasively argues for the democratic and egalitarian impulse of Humboldt’s reform. *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, II, 44-48.

further and equally important purpose of creating the precondition for new social bonds. By removing one institutional barrier between classes, Humboldt's egalitarianism made possible the association of persons who would not associate as citizens. In other words, *Bildung* itself came to function as the basis for the new social interaction so essential to *Bildung*.

The curriculum of the schools, Humboldt's third point, combined general education designed to permit the individual to cultivate his unique abilities with increasing freedom in moving up the educational ladder. Based on mathematics, classical languages, and history, the curriculum's goal was to provide a general education (*allgemeine Menschenbildung*) which would respect the individual development of each student. Only after such a general education would students proceed to specialized training.³³

The schools were divided into two units, with the university constituting a third: In the elementary school (*Elementarunterricht*) students learned basic skills. In the high school (*Schule*) students were taught to be intellectually independent. The curriculum aimed to show students *how* to learn as well as to learn specific material. A student was considered mature when "he had learned enough from others to be able to learn by himself."³⁴ The main function of the university was to congregate students in a community devoted to learning (*Wissenschaft*), and to vouchsafe their total freedom to interact with their peers in an environment which, saturated with learning, proffered numerous models of consummate cultivation.³⁵ This interaction would take the form not only of cooperation in learned matters but also of the true exchange and heightening of one's energies (*Kräfte*). For this reason, the students were to be neither subjected to compulsion nor limited to immediate purposes.³⁶

In the political practice of 1809-1810, Humboldt resolved the theoretical problem which his *Limits of State Action* posed: he conjoined his discovery of the nation with a reform of the institutions of education. By returning the schools to the nation, creating an egalitarian system suited to the person rather than to the citizen, and by providing a general education in an atmosphere of freedom, Humboldt hoped to foster the social bonds necessary to *Bildung*. His nascent nationalism provided the basis for his internal consistency; it did not compel him to abjure his earlier principles, as critics of his inconsistency have maintained.

Humboldt's consistency is manifested in a second way. His memoranda of 1809-1810 retain the very idiom of his early political writing and neo-humanism. Yet that idiom is not unalloyed. In order

³³ *GS*, XIII, 261-62, 266.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

³⁶ *GS*, X, 250-52.

to devise a practical educational program based on the autonomy of individual development, Humboldt had to reconcile neo-humanist with *Aufklärung* notions of *Bildung*, for the Prussian state had appropriated *Bildung* as its official pedagogy and demoted it from an autonomous ideal to an instrumental role.³⁷ In its translation from high into applied culture, then, *Bildung* had been essentially betrayed. That very task of application was to be one of Humboldt's contributions to the history of *Bildung*, and it is amply apparent in the idiom of the memoranda in which the *Aufklärung* and neo-humanist conceptions are successfully fused.

Humboldt achieved this reconciliation by assigning *Aufklärung* functions to neo-humanist ideas: the *Aufklärung* goal of service to the state is accomplished by a neo-humanist *Bildung*. Yet Humboldt did not regard *Bildung* as merely an instrument of the state. The goals of *Aufklärung* are to be realized indirectly as the intended yet incidental consequences of *Bildung*. Humboldt argues that persons educated to be free individuals will ultimately be better citizens than men educated to be citizens, just as science left to its own devices will be more fruitful than science supervised by the state.

Humboldt's reconciliation of the neo-humanist and *Aufklärung* conceptions of *Bildung* can be seen in his December 1, 1809 report to the King on the activities of the Section for Education:

(The Section) directs its general school program towards the entire mass of the nation, endeavoring to promote that development of human energies (*menschlichen Kräfte*) which is equally necessary for all estates (*allen Ständen*) and to which the abilities and knowledge required for each calling can easily be appended. (The Section's) undertaking is therefore to structure the graduated school system in such a fashion as to allow each of your Royal Highness' subjects to be educated (*gebildet*) to be moral men and good citizens (*sittlichen Menschen und guten Bürger*), each as his circumstances allow, though none should receive this instruction to which he devotes himself in such a way that it will be unfruitful and unnecessary for the other portions of his life. The following must therefore be achieved: that with the method of instruction one cares not that this or that be learned; but rather that in learning memory be exercised, understanding sharpened, judgment rectified, and moral feeling (*sittliche Gefühl*) refined.³⁸

In this passage the very idiom of the *Aufklärung* joins with neo-humanism: Education ultimately aims at creating a nation of "moral men and good citizens" and thus at serving the state. Yet the curriculum and the immediate pedagogical intentions are not determined by

³⁷ The case of J. H. Campe, the most influential *Aufklärung* pedagogue, editor of the *Revisionswerk* and one of Humboldt's tutors, illustrates this relationship between pedagogy and politics. See Ludwig Fertig, *Campe's Politische Erziehung* (Darmstadt, 1977).

³⁸ *GS*, X, 205.

that ultimate goal. State purposes will be best met by educating individuals to develop their unique characters rather than by subjecting them to a stultifying vocational training. If allowed to develop freely, each person will also be a productive and contributing citizen.

The same integration of direct and indirect goals characterized Humboldt's efforts to shift financial responsibility for the schools to the nation. Besides giving rise to new social bonds through the nation's participation in the schools, the nation's fiscal responsibility will also foster better, more "enlightened" and "moral" citizens.

The nation will have more interest in the school system when, from a pecuniary point of view the school system is the nation's work and property, and the nation will itself be more enlightened and moral (*aufgeklärter und gesitteter*), when it actively participates in the establishment of enlightenment and morality (*Aufklärung und Sittlichkeit*) in the coming generation.³⁹

Humboldt's plans for the University of Berlin also rest on the integration of direct neo-humanist goals with incidental *Aufklärung* consequences. Humboldt's plans, following the statement commonly attributed to Frederick William, called for the substitution of "moral" for physical power: with the Prussian state at the mercy of Napoleon, new weapons had to be forged to continue the struggle. Humboldt advocated a decisive commitment to science and learning which would win back for Prussia some of her lost prestige both at home and abroad. While the University would thus serve a political goal, Humboldt endeavored to guarantee its freedom from state interference by arguing that state interference of any sort was necessarily deleterious. The state must restrict itself to providing the outward framework, the institutions, and initial finances for sciences with the faith that its own purposes would be fulfilled in a far more efficacious and elevated manner than it could accomplish were it to take matters in its own hands.⁴⁰

This reconciliation also marks a crucial turning point in Humboldt's life, as it allowed him to resolve the conflict between his own training and character and thus to proceed to the truly creative work of his career. From his retirement until his call to Berlin in 1809, Humboldt's life had been characterized by unrealized projects and mounting discontent. Having decided to devote himself to his own cultivation and to making his mark as a thinker, he found that after eighteen years he still had not discovered a field suited to his abilities. The indulgence of his disposition, then, did not satisfy him, and the conflict between it and his training remained unresolved.⁴¹ The call to head the Section for Religion and Education, although he reluctantly

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 158, 253, 255.

⁴¹ *GS*, XV 517-18.

accepted it, answered his need. It gave him the opportunity to employ his early training and realize the promise of his early career in the service of his disposition. In other words, through the medium of neo-humanism he succeeded in transforming his disposition into a practical program. The theoretical reconciliation of *Aufklärung* and neo-humanism was also played out at the personal level. Humboldt's sixteen months in office constituted a great divide; they ended his period of self-indulgent speculation and refinement and ushered in the creative second half of his life.

Humboldt's historic reconciliation of *Aufklärung* and neo-humanist conceptions of *Bildung*, however, as well as the resolution of his own conflict between training and disposition, were not achieved without costs. The internal political imperative that informed Humboldt's early neo-humanist conception of *Bildung* was to vanish. The ambiguous interplay between inward self-cultivation and civic activity was lost. In this way Humboldt's educational reform was to depart from Stein's program. This point can only be elucidated by contrasting Humboldt's notions with the contemporary concept of *Bildung*.

Bildung was created by philosophers and belletrists who aestheticized religious and philosophical notions under the aegis of the Hellenic revival. It emerged with neo-humanism in the 1790s and became Protestant Germany's secular social ideal. *Bildung* corresponded to the needs and experiences of those segments of the bourgeoisie and enlightened aristocracy that had superseded the estate structure, providing an alternative social ideal to the otherworldly Christian, on the one side, and the courtly *galant-homme*, on the other.⁴² The *gebildeter Mensch* was held to have achieved individual perfection through self-cultivation and refinement that was tantamount to virtue if not salvation itself. In order for the individual to achieve and maintain that condition, the ideal of *Bildung* necessarily incorporated a vision of regenerated social relations. Society was to be recast to facilitate and foster self-cultivation, guaranteeing the freedom, autonomy, and harmony it required. At the end of the eighteenth century the neo-humanist concept of *Bildung* was not, however, entirely homogeneous.

Two notions of *Bildung* were current: one conception emphasized the internal spiritualized process by which man attained self-realization, and the other focused on the social activity integral to and

⁴² For *Bildung's* function in the breakdown of the estate system see Hans Weil, *Die Entstehung des deutschen Bildungsprinzips* (Bonn, 1930). For *Bildung* as an alternative social ideal see Friedrich Paulsen, *Geschichte des gelehrten Unterrichts*, (Berlin, 1921), II, 189-93.

coincident with *Bildung*'s consummation in man's self-harmony.⁴³ These two conceptions are clearly present in Wilhelm's famous letter to his friend Werner in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (Book 5, Chapter 3):

What good were it for me to manufacture perfect iron while my own breast is full of dross? What would it stead me to put properties of land in order, while I am at odds with myself (*mit mir selber uneins bin*)?⁴⁴

The first question literally indicates a process of inner refinement. Wilhelm concisely restates this idea in a one sentence summary of his quest: "The cultivation of my individual self, just as I am (*mich selbst, ganz wie ich da bin, auszubilden*)." This process has a completely inward direction with no goal besides perfecting all of one's abilities. In the second question Wilhelm enunciates his desire to achieve unity within himself, that is, to create a harmonious whole within himself which he might achieve only if provided with an appropriate sphere of

⁴³ These two conceptions are evident, *mutatis mutandis*, in Schiller's (1795) *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, where *Bildung* is both the means to freedom and the "condition of highest reality" (trans. Reginald Snell, [New York, 1965], 101). The inward and civic conceptions may well derive from distinct, if closely associated historical sources—the inward conception originating in the late medieval mysticism of Meister Eckhart and Heinrich Seuse, and what was to become the civic conception in the theosophical nature mysticism of Paracelsus, Jacob Böhme, and Leibniz in the notion of man as a consummate form of monads enmeshed in the web of nature. See Vierhaus, "Bildung," 509; Lichtenstein, *Zur Entwicklung*, 7-9; and Franz Rauhut, "Die Herkunft der Worte und Begriffe 'Kultur,' 'Civilization,' und 'Bildung'," *Germanische-Romanische Monatsschrift*, n.s. 3 (April, 1953), 88. The two conceptions appear to enter 18th-century German thought through Pietism, which linked them through its core of religious subjectivism. The inward conception was perpetuated in Pietism's mystical elements and was rendered civic in Pietism's doctrine of good works for the common weal according to which the individual's cultivated character served as the agent of change. See Gerhard Kaiser, *Pietismus und Patriotismus im Literarischen Deutschland* (Frankfurt, 1973), 1-14; F. Ernst Stoeffler, *German Pietism During the 18th Century* (Leiden, 1973), 10-36; Carl Hinrichs, "Der Hallische Pietismus als politischsoziale Reformbewegung des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel-und-Ostdeutschlands*, 2 (1953). Pietism's political and social role has become a subject of recent German historical scholarship. For Prussia see Klaus Depperman, *Der hallische Pietismus und der preussische Staat unter Friedrich III* (Göttingen, 1961); for Württemberg see Hartmut Lehmann, *Pietismus und weltliche Ordnung in Württemberg von 17. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1969). The two conceptions may have been secularized for 18th-century German thought by two foreign thinkers, i.e. Shaftesbury reinterpreting the civic conception linking aesthetics, morality and the "public good" in his *Soliloquy or Advice to an Author* (its notions of "inward form" and "Self-breeding" were consistently translated as *Bildung*), and Rousseau's *Emile* with its concept of negative education and its tension between person and citizen providing a refurbished notion of *Bildung* as an inward spiritual process.

⁴⁴ Carlyle's translation. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels* (New York, 1881), 217.

social action—a sphere denied to the bourgeoisie. Thus he seeks that sphere first within the theater and later within the Tower Society; only with the Tower Society does Wilhelm achieve this harmonious whole, for social relationships there have been reconstructed.

Both the inward and civic conceptions of *Bildung* are present in Humboldt's *Limits of State Action*, and although the two conceptions are closely associated, each one has a discernibly different function. The inward conception of *Bildung* appears in those passages in which he defends the freedom of the individual and the sovereignty of *Bildung*. As the process of *Bildung*, it serves to legitimate its moral and political import within Humboldt's conception. His conception of *Bildung* always appears as an end in itself; though the process of self-formation occurs in relationship to the world, it exists for its own sake. Humboldt adopted Kant's view of moral action for *Bildung*; a moral act must be performed categorically without any concern for its results.⁴⁵ Humboldt hence unreservedly stated that man's highest end is the pursuit of *Bildung* for its own sake:

The highest ideal, therefore, of the co-existence of human beings seems to me to consist in a union in which each strives to develop himself from his inmost nature, and for his own sake.⁴⁶

The civic conception of *Bildung* appears in those passages in which man is to consummate and activate his powers and faculties developed through self-cultivation. The civic conception is therefore the necessary completion of the social bonds necessary for *Bildung*. Though social ties are the societal precondition for *Bildung*, the individual who has achieved harmony in turn reacts upon society, and reshapes it according to the standard of that harmony. This process occurs spontaneously, for the moral life marks the consummation of the attainments of *Bildung*:

. . . the man whose sensibility is thus cultivated and developed displays the full beauty of his character when he enters into moral life.⁴⁷

This practical activity is decidedly political, for having rejected the cultivation of the citizen for that of the person, Humboldt argued that everyone must nevertheless fill the role of citizen. The cultivated man acts the citizen by judging the state and its constitution by the measure of his own achievements of harmony and cultivation. For Humboldt there is an internal moral imperative, then, which makes *Bildung* become the basis of politics:

He who has been thus freely developed should then attach himself to the State; and the State should test itself by his measure. Only through such a

⁴⁵ *Limits*, 28-29, 39.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

struggle could I confidently hope for a real improvement of the national constitution, and banish all fear of the harmful influence of civil institutions on human nature.⁴⁸

The *Limits of State Action* is informed, then, by the two associated conceptions of *Bildung*. Yet in the memoranda of 1809-1810 the civic conception does not appear. In the one passage where the civic conception's central notion of harmony does emerge, it has been totally assimilated to the inward process of *Bildung*. The educational system, Humboldt asserts, must aim at the "harmonious cultivation of all the faculties" of its students: their "understanding and knowledge" must not be subject to external circumstances but must achieve nobility through "inner precision, harmony, and beauty."⁴⁹ The concept of persons achieving inner harmony within the web of social interrelations has disappeared and so, too, has the activity issuing from that concept, the activity whereby man judges political relations by the standard of his own harmony.

The disappearance of the civic conception in Humboldt raises two questions: what are the implications of its loss, and second, why did it disappear? From Haym's imposing 1856 biography of Humboldt down to Meinecke's sensitive explications, German liberals have invariably argued that Humboldt's reforms were entirely of a piece with the reforms of Prussia proposed by Stein (1806-1808). Stein's reforms aimed to revive or establish anew local self-government. In his famous "Nassauer Denkschrift" of 1807, Stein outlined a program in which assemblies would be convened at rural, urban, provincial, and national levels and would form the basis of what would later become self-government in Prussia. He intended the assemblies to include commoners and members of the lower class as well as nobles, and assumed that the lower assemblies would serve as a training ground for those classes which were lacking in experience of political life. Stein especially realized that a reform of the educational system would be necessary to prepare the bourgeoisie for participation in political life.⁵⁰

The loss of the civic conception meant that although Humboldt counted himself among the reformers, attempting to return the educational system to the nation and to foster freedom and new social bonds, the political imperative that could have animated the schools was lost. The schools would not advance notions of civic activity but would remain an instrument of autocratic rule producing obedient if not apolitical subjects.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁹ *GS*, X, 256.

⁵⁰ Walter Simon, *The Failure of the Prussian Reform Movement* (Ithaca, 1955), 6-41; Krieger, *op. cit.*, 147-55. For a discussion of Stein's views on educational reform see Jeismann, *Das preussische Gymnasium*, 273-78.

Why did this change occur in Humboldt's thought? Did the civic conception gradually dissolve in the intervening years or was it abruptly suppressed? The civic conception is present in Humboldt's writing down to 1807,⁵¹ but it was then suppressed because of the nationalist threat to the sovereignty of *Bildung* represented pre-eminently by Fichte. Like Humboldt, Fichte began his career as a liberal in the 1790s, yet he was "politicized, under the auspices of nationalism, in a conservative direction."⁵² Initially espousing a radical voluntarism developed from Kant's second *Critique*, Fichte later posited the primacy of the nation under the impact of Napoleon, yet he never relinquished the earlier position for the later one. His later system was a tense and ever-shifting attempt at a balance between the two positions.

Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808), containing his hope for a regeneration of Germany through pedagogy after the humiliation of Jena in 1806, reveal the central tension of his thought. Fichte attempts to reconcile the free self-reliant intellectual and ultimately moral activity of the individual—the avowed basis of regeneration—with a system of education that subordinates the individual to the nation with the aim of producing loyal and patriotic citizens. While the students are to be taught according to the pedagogical techniques of Pestalozzi, which depend on free self-activity, the schools themselves are to be strictly regimented (children are to be removed from their parents' homes and raised in economically autarchic communities where teachers serve as confessors as well as instructors). In his attempt to reconcile the primacy of the moral individual with the primacy of the state, Fichte constructed a platonic educational structure that transformed *Bildung* into mere pedagogy with a pre-determined patriotic content.⁵³

Fichte's ideas were not those of an isolated individual; he represented the theoretical tip of an iceberg, a middle-class movement for national education (*Nationalerziehung*) which developed out of the *Aufklärung* and aimed at a revamped and consolidated school system; it would educate members of all estates to be productive and useful citizens as it strove to replace pedigree with merit and talent. In its

⁵¹ For example *GS*, III, 184.

⁵² Krieger, *op. cit.*, 192. Historians have been slow to draw distinctions among the educational reformers. For an early exception see Schnabel, *Deutsche Geschichte*, I, 443-449; and more recently Jeismann, *Das preussische Gymnasium*, 221-94. McClelland's distinction between a "pragmatic" Schleiermacher and a "dogmatic" and "utopian" Fichte, though suggestive, is insufficient as it fails to classify Humboldt (*State, Society & University*, 142f). Sweet persuasively analyzes Humboldt's, Fichte's and Süvern's differing views of the political uses of education (*Wilhelm von Humboldt*, II, 3-30).

⁵³ *Addresses to the German Nation*, ed. George Kelley (New York, 1968).

early decades (1770-1789) the movement was divided between support for and opposition to enlightened despotism and also between loyalty to the Holy Roman Empire and to the individual state. The French Revolution exacerbated the divisions by using a national system of education as the champion of the republican ideals of the revolution or as an anti-revolutionary bulwark inculcating obedience and patriotism.⁵⁴

Napoleon's defeat of Prussia galvanized the movement for national education endowing it with a unified purpose: the defeat of the French. The major ideas of the earlier period were taken up and given more precise formulations. More importantly, national education now became political education with patriotism the predominant component of the new educational plans. German language and literature replaced classical philology as the pillar of the curriculum, for it served the immediate purpose of resisting French influence. Instruction in history, geography, and civics (*Staatsbürgerkunde*) was similarly emphasized because of its immediate value, and physical education received strong support as preparation for military training.⁵⁵

The movement for national education, like Fichte's program—although his theory was more complex and rife with tensions—further reduced neo-humanism to mere pedagogy, with Pestalozzi providing the model. *Bildung* itself was subordinated, having abdicated its sovereignty to patriotism and political training. In this way Fichte represented a perpetuation of the policies of the official *Aufklärung* and the absolutist state, even though clad in the new guise of nationalism.⁵⁶ *Bildung* in Fichte's hands was a political instrument with a determinate content and preordained goal.

Humboldt's opposition to the movement for national political education, albeit oblique, is unmistakable. Humboldt rejected political education through the prism of Greek history in his 1807 essay on the "Decline and Fall of the Greek Free States;" There he argued that the Athenian state succumbed to its less cultured neighbors because it did not institute a purely political education (*rein politische Erziehung*) "which, by limiting freedom and culture, would have strengthened Athens against both internal turmoil and external enemies."⁵⁷ The

⁵⁴ Helmut König, *Zur Geschichte der Nationalerziehung in Deutschland im letzten Drittel des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Monumenta Paedagogica (Berlin, 1960), I, 477-86.

⁵⁵ Helmut König, *Zur Geschichte der bürgerlichen Nationalerziehung, 1807-15*, Monumenta Paedagogica (Berlin, 1972), XII, 112-14.

⁵⁶ Schnabel, *Deutsche Geschichte*, I, 418-19.

⁵⁷ *GS*, III, 178. Sweet points out the singular lack of patriotic sentiments in Humboldt's letters of the period and the bemused irony with which he regarded the obligatory pious treatment of Fichte's *Addresses*. See *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, II, 11, 24.

Athenians did not institute such an education, Humboldt claimed, because it was inimical to their very nature; the Greeks were “too noble, sensitive, free, and humane.” It was precisely these qualities of the Greek character which made them paragons of *Bildung* and the cultural forefathers of the modern world. Humboldt saw Athens enmeshed, then, in a tragic dilemma: it could have survived politically at the cost of its greatness, or it could have momentarily maintained its greatness by ultimately foresaking political freedom and its very existence. Humboldt defended the Athenian decision.

Humboldt’s tragic view of Greek history clearly expressed his view of the Prussian state. He saw clear parallels between Prussian and Greek history, pointing out their manifold affinities.⁵⁸ Because of these affinities, Germany’s inheritance from Greece, its *Bildung*, must be preserved. Thus Humboldt’s essay, although in one sense a flattering apology for Prussia’s defeat, more importantly delineated the relationship of politics to *Bildung*; “The Decline and Fall of the Greek Free States” poignantly reasserted *Bildung*’s primacy.

Humboldt’s opposition to the Fichtean movement for national education led him to suppress the civic conception of *Bildung* which had fundamental similarities to the *Bildung* of national political education. It emphasized the product rather than the process of *Bildung* although it did not determine the final content of the product but only its form, harmony. In addition, the civic conception had direct political implications, unlike the inward conception which Humboldt put indirectly to *Aufklärung* purposes. Because of these fundamental affinities, Humboldt might well have felt that the autonomy of *Bildung* would be endangered were he to maintain the civic conception. His balanced reconciliation of *Aufklärung* purposes with the sovereignty of neo-humanist *Bildung* might well have collapsed were Humboldt’s ideas to have been confused with those of Fichte’s movement for national political education. This was no idle threat since Humboldt’s own immediate subordinate, Johann Süvern (1775-1829), had delivered a series of lectures in 1807-1809 remarkably similar to those of his teacher, Fichte.⁵⁹ The ranks of government, then, above as well as below Humboldt, no doubt contained their share of patriotic enthusiasts willing to misconstrue Humboldt’s reforms had they contained any traces of the national political education.

Neither the liberal commonplace of Humboldt’s position in Stein’s reform nor the revisionist commonplace of his conversion to nationalism can be defended. The continuity of Humboldt’s thought and action consists first, in his search for social bonds, a problem he inherited from the Leibnizian organic concept of man and which, fundamental to Humboldt’s Rousseauist reorientation of political

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 185.

⁵⁹ König, *Zur Geschichte der Nationalerziehung*, 324-28.

thought, was only resolved in the political practice of 1809-1810; and second, in his reconciliation of *Aufklärung* and neo-humanist conception of *Bildung* that provide for the primacy of self-development in a government administered educational system. This reconciliation, which solved his personal conflict by successfully transforming his disposition into a practical educational program, had the unfortunate consequence that *Bildung* was deprived of its political imperative. In his endeavor to resist the politicized educational system advocated by the movement for national education, Humboldt created a depoliticized notion of *Bildung* that could contribute little to the formation of public political life.

The fate of the civic conception of *Bildung* indeed adumbrated the political fate of Humboldt's entire reform. Despite his historic reconciliation of *Aufklärung* and neo-humanist conceptions of *Bildung*, Humboldt's program came to serve functions in the course of the nineteenth century diametrically opposed to those for which it had been conceived. First, despite the genuine egalitarianism of Humboldt's idea of general education, institutionalized *Bildung* became the social and ideological basis of a new elite lacking the internal imperative of political activity and wedded to the state in exchange for the state's identification with culture.⁶⁰ Second, Humboldt's skillfully wrought balance between state service and the autonomy of *Bildung* was shattered in the process of its institutionalization under the impact of Prussia's changing politics. By the 1820s the Ministry of Religion and Education had clearly accommodated the program of the Reform period to the politics of the Restoration.⁶¹ *Bildung*, consequently, became the first servant of the Prussian state. Humboldt's reorientation of political thought and his reconciliation of neo-humanism with the *Aufklärung* was subverted as the state-subordinated educational program of the eighteenth century, continued in new guise into the nineteenth. While Humboldt had not departed from his liberalism, his educational reform did in the end become a basis for the capitulation of the intelligentsia to the state.

University of California at Berkeley.

⁶⁰ Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*, 81-128.

⁶¹ Two periods are discernible: from 1810 to 1817 the reform was sapped by financial difficulties, political opposition and a new crop of bureaucrats unsympathetic to the original program; after 1817 the spirit and politics of the reform were consciously altered. See Jeismann, *Das preussische Gymnasium*, 335-94.