


BULWARK AGAINST RACISM? HUMBOLDT'S INFLUENCE ON THE RACIAL NOTIONS OF GERMAN WRITERS IN MEXICO (1920s–1940s)

ANDREA ACLE-KREYSING 

(GLOBAL AND EUROPEAN STUDIES INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITÄT LEIPZIG)

ABSTRACT

Alexander von Humboldt was regarded as an anti-fascist symbol among German-speaking exiles who, fleeing persecution from the Nazi regime, found refuge in Mexico. Humboldt's legacy was read as being an endorsement of the country's struggle for political and cultural emancipation, while his famously anti-racist stance proved helpful in framing the exiles' unprecedented encounter with Mexico's indigenous peoples. Moreover, as I argue, Humboldt's approach to creating knowledge indicated a willingness to treat non-Europeans as intellectual peers, paving the way for a more egalitarian relationship between Germans and Mexicans. Yet the legacy of Humboldt, as will be seen with reference to several German writers between the 1920s and 1940s, was far from being an unailing antidote to both racist attitudes or the tendency to exoticise. These tensions will be exemplified through works by Alfons Goldschmidt, B. Traven, Egon Erwin Kisch, Ludwig Renn and Gustav Regler, using novel sources and calling into question some of the established truths in the literature about German exiles in Mexico. In particular, I will show why Goldschmidt was considered by fellow exiles to be Humboldt's successor, insofar as both gave a political and ethical dimension to scientific practice.

Alexander von Humboldt galt als antifaschistisches Symbol unter den deutschsprachigen Exilanten, die auf der Flucht vor dem Nazi-Regime in Mexiko Zuflucht fanden. Humboldts Vermächtnis wurde als Unterstützung des Kampfes für die politische und kulturelle Emanzipation des Landes gewertet, während sich seine bekanntermaßen antirassistische Haltung als hilfreich erwies, um die erstmalige Begegnung der Exilanten mit den indigenen Völkern Mexikos zu gestalten. Darüber hinaus, wie ich argumentiere, propagierte Humboldts Art und Weise, Wissen zu schaffen, die Bereitschaft Nicht-Europäer als intellektuelle 'Peers' zu behandeln, und ebnete damit den Weg für ein gleichberechtigteres Verhältnis zwischen Deutschen und Mexikanern. Dennoch war das Vermächtnis Humboldts, wie es in Bezug auf mehrere deutsche Schriftsteller zwischen den 1920er und 1940er Jahren gezeigt werden wird, weit davon entfernt ein unfehlbares Gegenmittel, weder gegen rassistische Einstellungen, noch gegen eine Tendenz zur Exotisierung, zu sein. Diese Spannungen werden anhand von Werken von Alfons Goldschmidt, B. Traven, Gustav Regler und Ludwig Renn veranschaulicht, wobei neue Quellen herangezogen und einige der etablierten Wahrheiten in der Literatur über das deutsche Exil in Mexiko in Frage gestellt werden. Insbesondere führe ich aus, dass Goldschmidt von bedeutenden Exilkollegen als Humboldt-Nachfolger gesehen wurde, da beide der wissenschaftlichen Praxis eine politische und ethische Dimension verliehen.

'All are alike designed for freedom' – according to Alexander Abusch, this quotation from Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), signifying the essential equality of all peoples, was part of the 'geistiges Gepäck (spiritual baggage)' carried by German-speaking exiles who found in Latin America a refuge from fascism.¹ The experience of having been forced to migrate to previously unknown countries, as confirmed by the writer Anna Seghers, had taught Germans a lesson: 'dass die fremden Völker nicht geringer sind als das eigene Volk, allesamt, wie Humboldt gewußt hat, "zur Freiheit" bestimmt (that foreign peoples are not inferior to one's own people because all of them, as Humboldt well knew, are "destined for freedom")'.² As this narrative suggests, Humboldt's ideas were then re-purposed, not only to dismantle the racist ideas of Nazism but also to frame its exiles' encounter with the New World. This encounter included contact – in most cases unprecedented – with the indigenous peoples of the Americas and their descendants who, from a European perspective, had often been pictured as being not only cultural but also racial 'others'.

While it should be noted that Humboldt was appropriated by Nazis and anti-Nazis alike, among anti-fascist exiles his legacy became synonymous with an endorsement of Latin America's fight for political and cultural emancipation. In the writings of Ludwig Renn and Egon Erwin Kisch, communist writers exiled in Mexico, Humboldt's support of Latin America's struggle against colonial oppression at the turn of the nineteenth century was taken to a new level in positive appraisal of modern Mexico's search for greater political, economic and cultural autonomy. What tends to be overlooked is that these exiles paid homage to a man of their own generation whom they considered to be Humboldt's heir: Alfons Goldschmidt (1879–1940). In the 1920s, this German economist and Marxist activist travelled extensively through Latin America, seeking – like Humboldt – to bring this region to the attention of European audiences. In this article, I will argue that in the works of Humboldt and Goldschmidt all-encompassing narratives played a key role in their depictions of Latin America (and Latin Americans) as variations on a single theme, whether that theme was a shared humanity or a global proletarian struggle. In the first section, I reflect upon what Humboldt's legacy meant for subsequent appraisals of Latin America, seen through the eyes of German writers. In essence, Humboldt's legacy can be attributed to the fact that he was, as Laura Dassow Walls observes, the only major nineteenth-century scientist to argue invariably that race was not a biological category, and that there could thus be no 'scientific' ranking of superior and inferior races.³ Hence, in

¹ Alexander Abusch, *Mit offenem Visier. Memoiren*, Berlin 1986, p. 41.

² Anna Seghers, 'Aufgaben der Kunst [1944]', in *Aufsätze, Ansprachen, Essays 1927–1953, Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben*, 13 vols, Berlin 1980, XIII, pp. 168–74 (p. 173).

³ Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos. Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America*, Chicago 2009, p. 174.

assessing Humboldt's influence on successive generations, I emphasise two elements: his refusal to explain historical developments through biology, and his disposition to treat non-Europeans as potential intellectual peers.

In the second section, I examine the case of Goldschmidt in the context of the mid-1920s, when, driven by the pursuit of both scientific and political objectives, he adopted a Humboldtian guise as a European traveller in search of the *true* Mexico. As a counterpoint to Goldschmidt, whose positive appreciation of the Mexican *indios* (indigenous peoples)⁴ was accompanied by an outright rejection of biological definitions of 'race', reference will be made to several German contemporaries who also wrote about Mexico in the 1920s, such as B. Traven, Karl Sapper and Adolf Reichwein. In the third section, I concentrate upon the next wave of German-speaking writers who, fleeing from fascism, arrived in Mexico during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The name of Humboldt, revered in Mexico, became an object of contention between the German colony and the newly-arrived exiles. Among the latter, communist authors such as Kisch, Renn and Abusch insisted upon the incompatibility between Nazi racial ideology and what they regarded as Humboldt's deep appreciation for both the Jews and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. In the fourth and final section, I reflect upon how the Mexican indigenous 'other' also became a vessel for the projection of political ideals – or the alleged lack of them, as in the case of the ex-communist writer Gustav Regler.

This will enable me to reflect upon how – and why – Mexico became both a literary motif and a political metaphor for several generations of German writers. As I argue, Mexico became a sort of canvas on which to depict a series of complex questions, ranging from the relationship between culture and biology to the complex interplay, within a given culture, between universal and particular (i.e. national) features. What makes twentieth-century Mexico especially interesting is that, for Germans abroad, the legacy of Humboldt became inseparable from any attempt to define – or to re-define – what 'Germanness' truly meant, especially in a non-European context. Specifically, for those who were persecuted by the Nazi regime, having been deprived of their citizenship and academic titles, this attempt acquired a sense of urgency: it became their *raison d'être*. According to the journalist Bruno Frei, who spent the wartime years exiled in Mexico City, 'wenn in Deutschland die Antideutschen herrschten, so waren wir hier die wahren Deutschen, die Erben Goethes und Kants, und – was in Mexiko noch mehr zählte – die Erben Alexander von Humboldts, die Mexiko für die Kulturwelt entdeckte (if in Germany the anti-Germans ruled, here we were the true Germans, the heirs of Goethe and Kant, and – what counted even more in Mexico – the heirs of

⁴ 'Indios' is nowadays regarded as a pejorative term, and has been replaced by 'pueblos indígenas (indigenous peoples)'. To indicate this discrepancy between my sources and the current connotation of the word, I use it in italics throughout this article.

Alexander von Humboldt, who discovered Mexico for the cultural world)'.⁵ In reality, the translation of Humboldtian ideals into practice was far from being as self-evident as this quotation suggests. Regardless of the intrinsic value of Humboldt's anti-racist stance, his legacy was not free of ambiguity. As will be seen, it was one thing to claim the abstract equality of all peoples, and another to consider non-Europeans as peers in cultural, scientific and political matters.

UNDERSTANDING HUMBOLDT'S LEGACY

In 1799, the German scientist Alexander von Humboldt set sail for the New World. He was to remain there for five years, travelling to present-day Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela, all of which were then colonies of Spain, as well as to the United States. Humboldt was one of the first foreigners to be granted unlimited travel rights in Spanish colonial territories. From this vantage point he undertook what Mary Louise Pratt calls a 'reinvention' of the Americas, as he imagined a promising future for vast territories now under the colonial yoke. This newly awakened interest in the Americas, fostered by Humboldt's vast body of work, predominantly served the interests of two groups: Northern European elites in search of new markets; and Spanish American elites in need of a new self-identity that would justify their independence from Spain.⁶ During his time in New Spain, now Mexico, Humboldt was to witness the colony's first steps towards emancipation. His sympathies lay mainly with the elite and middle-class creoles of a liberal persuasion, that is, with those inclined to open the country up to foreign trade, establish a republican government and curtail the influence of the Catholic Church.⁷ This was to form the ideological background of Humboldt's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of the New Spain* (1811).

Heralded as 'the most influential book on Mexico ever penned by a foreign observer', the *Political Essay* at the same time elicited a fierce debate among the Mexican elite as to how the country's potential might be unlocked.⁸ This is indicative of how Humboldt's role as the 'wissenschaftlicher Entdecker weiter Bezirke Lateinamerikas (scientific discoverer of vast regions of Latin America)' was, from the outset, subject to multiple and even contradictory interpretations.⁹ Humboldt's work may

⁵ Bruno Frei, *Der Papiersäbel. Autobiographie*, Frankfurt a. M. 1972, p. 240.

⁶ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York 2008, pp. 109–11 and 116–7.

⁷ See Jürgen Buchenau, 'A Land of Contrasts. Alexander von Humboldt', in *Mexico Otherwise: Modern Mexico in the Eyes of Foreign Observers*, ed. Jürgen Buchenau, Albuquerque 2005, pp. 17–27 (14–15). In the same volume, see Jürgen Buchenau, 'Introduction', pp. 1–11 (p. 6).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹ See Markus Kenzler, *Der Blick in die andere Welt: Einflüsse Lateinamerikas auf die Bildende Kunst der DDR*, Münster 2012, I, p. 523.

have served to make the region a renewed focus of both scientific research and imperial expansion, but it also contained a distinctive anti-colonial and anti-slavery discourse. This discourse derived from his personal acquaintance with the Spanish colonies, where native populations – as well as imported African slaves – lived in what he called a ‘state of degradation’.¹⁰

This was especially evident in the case of New Spain, famously referred to by Humboldt as ‘the country of inequality’, seemingly unrivalled in its ‘fearful difference in the distribution of fortune, civilization, cultivation of the soil and population’.¹¹ Humboldt attempted to come to terms with the apparent disdain of the indigenous people of New Spain for ‘intellectual cultivation’, which he deemed to be starkly at odds with the past glories of pre-Hispanic civilisations in the Americas. He concluded that, in the sixteenth century, the Spanish *conquistadores* had destroyed the ‘best sort of Indians’ together with their ‘means of instruction’, that is, their repositories of astronomical, mythological and historical knowledge. Humboldt consequently invited his readers to draw an analogy: ‘if all that remained of the French or the German nation were a few poor agriculturists, could we read in their features that they belonged to nations which had produced a Descartes, a Clairaut, a Kepler and a Leibnitz?’¹² Despite suggesting that the *indios*’ meekness might hide the ‘cunning’ of a population who ‘compelled to a blind obedience [...] wishes to tyrannize in turn’, Humboldt called for an end to their subjugation that would simultaneously deliver them from the ‘perpetual tutory of the whites’.¹³

Humboldt also witnessed how skin colour was a key element in determining a person’s rank in society. Although the Spanish colonial administration revolved around the idea that populations could neatly be divided into ‘indians’ and ‘whites’, in practice these categories were not absolute. Myriad subtypes were developed, including the *mestizos*, a growing group of people of mixed indigenous and European descent. However, the notion that ‘racial mixing has never in itself destroyed racial privilege’ was confirmed by the fact that whiteness remained as supreme ideal, maintained through peculiar social conventions.¹⁴ Travelling through the Orinoco jungle, Humboldt met a certain Don Ignacio, a dark-skinned man who sheltered him for a night. Oblivious to his skin colour, Don Ignacio

¹⁰ Alexander von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, tr. John Black, London 1811, cited in Buchenau, ‘A Land of Contrasts’ (note 7), pp. 18–19. In Humboldt’s essay on Cuba (1826), whose booming sugar and coffee plantations were sustained by slaves imported from Africa, he categorically condemned slavery for both economic and moral reasons. On how he nevertheless established a working relationship with *negros* (slave traders) in Cuba, who, as members of that country’s elite, were able to facilitate his research, see the article by Michael Zeuske in this volume.

¹¹ Humboldt, *Political Essay* (note 10), pp. 184 and 188, cited in Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos* (note 3), p. 177.

¹² Humboldt, *Political Essay* (note 10), pp. 20–21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–4. See also Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos* (note 3), pp. 176–7.

¹⁴ Steven Garner, *Racisms. An Introduction*, London 2017, p. 169.

was convinced that his own relative good fortune and civilised bearing was due to his being ‘gente blanca y de trato (a well-educated white person)’.¹⁵ Needless to say, neither a positive self-perception nor exceptions to the norm could redress a fundamental imbalance regarding the subordination of the many to a minority composed of European-born Spaniards whose power was increasingly challenged by another minority, that of the *criollos* (creoles), born in America and claiming European (or white) ancestry.

So, what made Humboldt’s analysis of ‘race’ exceptional compared to that of his contemporaries? In short, it was his choice of optimism over determinism: his conviction that ‘intelligence and civilization are a product of historical circumstance rather than biologically conditioned’.¹⁶ Here, Humboldt went against the main corpus of Enlightenment thinking that had established a causal link between climate, physical appearance and intellectual capacity. As exemplified in the writings of David Hume, the Comte de Buffon and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, this line of thought concluded that the pale-skinned people living in the temperate zones of Europe and America represented the highest form of civilisation and, as such, were entitled to master both nature and other human beings.¹⁷ These ideas served as the background – and justification – for the Atlantic slave trade, and would be carried forward by social Darwinists in the late nineteenth century and by eugenicists in the twentieth.¹⁸ Ultimately, the spread of scientific racism on both sides of the Atlantic contradicted Humboldt’s views on mankind, as exemplified by this oft-cited quotation from *Kosmos* (1845–62), his *magnum opus*:

In maintaining the unity of the human kind, we at the same time repudiate all the unsatisfactory assumptions of higher and lower races of men. There are races of men more flexible, more highly polished, through mental culture more ennobled, but none naturally more noble. All are in equal measure ordained for liberty; for liberty which in ruder conditions of society appertains to the individual, which in more polished states, in civil life and among men in the enjoyment of political institutions, is the right of the community.¹⁹

There is one aspect of Humboldt’s plea that is often overlooked, however: the notion that all people are equally capable of producing knowledge. In abandoning universal racial hierarchies and seeking to focus upon what was unique in each people’s development, Humboldt did more than prefigure

¹⁵ Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos* (note 3), pp. 179–89, narrates this episode, recounted by Humboldt in his *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America. During the Years 1799–1804* (3 vols, published between 1814 and 1825).

¹⁶ Buchenau, ‘A Land of Contrasts’ (note 7), p. 27, footnote 6.

¹⁷ Garner, *Racisms* (note 14), p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos. A General Survey of the Physical Phenomena of the Universe*, tr. Augustin Prichard, 2 vols, London 1845 and 1848, I, p. 391.

a modern and ideally non-judgmental cultural relativism.²⁰ His merit was to retain the idea of a common denominator – a ‘common humanity’ – that made it possible to ‘to treat all mankind, without reference to religion, nation, or to colour, as one great and nearly related family’.²¹ The advocacy of the unity of mankind reflects, in turn, the influence exercised upon Humboldt by one of his professors at Göttingen University, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840). A pioneer of comparative anatomy, Blumenbach famously classified men into five ‘races’ and carried out skull measurements – but, at the same time, was a staunch supporter of the common origin and equal mental aptitudes of all human beings, as illustrated by his rejection of black slavery.²² In the context of the late Enlightenment’s Republic of Letters, Blumenbach expanded his scholarly network well beyond Germany, establishing contacts with scientists from several European countries.

It could be argued that Humboldt, as he *physically* bridged the gap between two continents, paved the way for a significant expansion of this network of scientific exchanges so that (ideally) both Europeans and non-Europeans could contribute to the creation of knowledge. Between 1799 and 1804, as Humboldt travelled through the Americas, he exchanged letters with eighty-two individuals and local academic institutions.²³ His interest in indigenous peoples was, as Adrián Herrera argues, not merely archaeological, and they feature widely in Humboldt’s travelogues as the providers of valuable information and guides who use their languages both to express complex ideas and to mount a symbolic resistance to Spanish, the colonial *lingua franca*.²⁴ Hence the importance of further analysing the role played by Humboldt as a ‘transculturator’ who, according to Mary Louise Pratt, brought to Europe an ‘American scholarly tradition’ maintained by ‘Spanish, “mestizo” and indigenous intellectuals’ and, at the same time, was able to produce ‘European knowledges infiltrated by non-European ones’.²⁵

So, does Humboldt’s scientific approach ultimately escape narrow (i.e. geographical) definitions of who is entitled to produce knowledge of

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 180–1. As Dassow Walls explains (note 3) these views were shared by Wilhelm, Humboldt’s brother, who specialised in linguistics and believed that each language embodied a particular people’s world view, and was thus neither superior nor inferior to others.

²¹ Humboldt, *Kosmos* (note 19), p. 391, footnote 413. This was a quotation from a work by Wilhelm von Humboldt on the Kawi (Old Javanese) language.

²² On Blumenbach and the reception of his ideas over time, see Nicolaas Rupke and Gerhard Lauer, ‘Introduction: A brief history of Blumenbach representation’, Rupke and Lauer (eds), *Johann Friedrich Blumenbach: Race and Natural History, 1750–1850*, London 2019, pp. 3–16. I thank Nicolaas Rupke for pointing this out, as well as for his positive feedback on this article.

²³ See Ulrike Moheit, ‘Einleitung’, in *Alexander von Humboldt. Briefe aus Amerika 1799–1804*, Berlin 1993, pp. 7–22 (p. 17).

²⁴ See Adrián Herrera, ‘El indígena a través del diálogo y los actos de habla en el viaje americano de Alexander von Humboldt’, *Iberoamericana*, 70 (2019), 9–24.

²⁵ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (note 6), p. 132.

'European' quality? Few have to date acknowledged Humboldt's debt to non-European scholarly traditions. In his critique of Andrea Wulf's acclaimed work on Humboldt (*The Invention of Nature*, 2015), Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra lamented the author's failure to mention the fruitful interactions between Humboldt and his peers in Spanish America, which wrongly implied that the flow of scientific knowledge was 'one-way' only.²⁶ This opens the door to questions of intellectual ownership – questions that also affected Humboldt during his lifetime. Here, we might cite the role played by Humboldt's colleague in New Spain, Andrés del Río, in discovering vanadium.²⁷ It also appears that Humboldt appropriated and failed to duly acknowledge the Peruvian Hipólito Unanue's work on ocean currents along the western coast of South America.²⁸ These issues of ownership and acknowledgement were to rear their heads at the beginning of the twentieth century, as a new generation of German writers came to Mexico. While their writings on Humboldt were a conscious attempt to adapt the German classics to fit their own left-wing political agenda, the influence exercised by the Mexican context in which this very attempt took place continues to be underestimated. Like Humboldt, their knowledge about Mexico was the result of first-hand observation. Yet, as I contend, it was also inseparable from a broad array of social interactions and exchanges: with colleagues and peers at universities and political organisations, as well as with peasants, workers and indigenous peoples.

ALFONS GOLDSCHMIDT IN MEXICO: FOLLOWING IN HUMBOLDT'S FOOTSTEPS?

'Beide, Humboldt und Goldschmidt waren Wortführer der besten humanistischen Ideen ihrer Zeit [...] sie träumten von einer Zukunft, in der keine Rasse und kein Volk diskriminiert wird (Both Humboldt and Goldschmidt were spokesmen for the best humanistic ideas of their time [...] they dreamed of a future in which no race and no people would be discriminated against)' – declared the writer Ludwig Renn during a ceremony held in Mexico City in November 1942.²⁹ In his role as a leading figure of the newly-founded anti-fascist organisation *Bewegung Freies Deutschland* (Free German Movement, active in 1942–6), Renn spoke before

²⁶ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, 'Sobre Humboldt y el colonialismo epistemológico: *La invención de la naturaleza* de Andrea Wulf', https://medium.com/@jorgecanizaresesguerra/sobre-humboldt-y-el-colonialismo-epistemologico-la-invenccion-de-la-naturaleza-de-andrea-wulf-c23da2dfbb40#_ftnref10 (accessed 17 February 2020). See also Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire and Nation*, Stanford 2006, especially chapter 6.

²⁷ Aurelio Nieto Codina, 'Alejandro de Humboldt y Andrés Manuel del Río. Encuentros y desencuentros en la ciencia de la Nueva España', *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma*, 11 (2018), 337–48.

²⁸ See Gregory T. Cushman, 'Humboldtian Science, Creole Meteorology and the Discovery of Human-Caused Climate Change in South America', *Osiris*, 26 (2011), 19–44.

²⁹ Ludwig Renn, 'Wir und Alfons Goldschmidt', *Freies Deutschland*, 2. Jahrgg./Nr. 1 (November–December 1942), 19. The translation and all further translations in this article are by the author.

an audience composed of key representatives of the Mexican left, as well as of the local Jewish community. By positing a link between the Prussian polymath and the German-Jewish activist, Renn cleverly adapted the rhetoric of 'antifascist humanism' deployed by contemporary communist intellectuals to the specific circumstances of Mexico, where Humboldt continues to be revered today.³⁰ In 1930s Germany, this communist-inspired rhetoric posited 'humanism' as the common thread that ran through both 'classical German culture' and their own, Marxist-inspired struggle against fascism. As Abusch succinctly put it, this rhetorical move stemmed from the conviction that it would be a great mistake to 'leave Schiller [or, in this case, Humboldt] to the Nazis'.³¹ In this article, I neither attempt to reinvent the canon so that Humboldt and Goldschmidt can be put on the same pedestal, nor to undertake a direct – and necessarily anachronistic – comparison between them. My aim is to highlight how their respective views on 'race' challenged their 'Zeitgeist' in a few crucial aspects.

Unlike Renn and many German-speaking anti-fascists who found in Mexico a mostly unexpected 'haven for left-wing political exiles' as they fled from Hitler-dominated Europe, Goldschmidt deliberately travelled to the Americas during the 1920s. He crossed the Atlantic several times with the objective of discovering local variations on what he deemed to be general laws: the Marxist paradigms of economic development. A business journalist by profession, Goldschmidt had been deeply impressed by the Russian Revolution (1917) and became one of the first Western intellectuals to provide an enthusiastic first-hand description of the new Soviet society in *Moskau* (1920), although he never joined the Communist Party.³² This quasi-conversion took place when Goldschmidt was thirty-eight years old and meant, in practical terms, the end of a comfortable lifestyle and the beginning of his career as a cosmopolitan activist with no fixed income or, after the rise of Hitler, no fixed abode either.

As someone who believed the significance of the Russian Revolution of 1917 lay in signalling a sense of global interconnectedness among peoples of all countries, Goldschmidt soon extended the radius of his activities to the Americas.³³ Thanks to a translation into Spanish of *Moskau*,

³⁰ In 1827, the first president of Mexico made Humboldt an honorary citizen of the country and, in 1859, Benito Juárez – Mexico's first indigenous president – declared him 'benemérito de la patria' (roughly translates as 'benefactor of the homeland'). In 1997, Humboldt was commemorated by a major exhibition in Mexico City, as well as by a multi-authored book that aptly showcases local expertise: Frank Holl et al., *Alejandro de Humboldt en México*, Mexico 1997.

³¹ Alexander Abusch, 'Weder Schiller noch ein anderes Stück von Deutschland', Leitartikel der *Roten Fahne*, 2 (1937), cited by Andreas Agocs, *Antifascist Humanism and the Politics of Cultural Renewal in Germany*, Cambridge 2017, pp. 32–5.

³² For a comprehensive account of Goldschmidt's life, see Wolfgang Kießling, 'Vom Grunewald nach Woodstock über Moskau. Alfons Goldschmidt im USA-Exil', in *Politische Aspekte des Exils*, ed. Thomas Koebner, Wulf Köpke, Claus-Dieter Krohn and Liselotte Maas, Munich 1990, pp. 106–27.

³³ The original citation (Alfons Goldschmidt, *Wie ich Moskau wiederfand*, Berlin 1925, p. 35) is: 'Die französische Revolution gebar das nationale Bewußtsein, die russische Revolution gebiert

Goldschmidt became known in Argentina, so that, in 1922, he received an invitation from a group of students at the University of Córdoba, then a hotspot of student activism campaigning for the modernisation of Argentine universities.³⁴ However brief and ill-fated, Goldschmidt's stay in Argentina came with the unexpected benefit of meeting José Vasconcelos, Mexican Minister of Education, who invited him to teach Marxism at Mexico's National University.³⁵ Although Goldschmidt received advice from a German colleague to stay away from what he regarded as a 'Revolver- und Dolch-Land (gun and dagger country)', Goldschmidt's curiosity prevailed. He was keen on witnessing the effects of the Mexican Revolution and, especially, on becoming acquainted with a society where the indigenous peoples still had profound influence in the local culture,³⁶ unlike in Argentina, where they had been decimated.

What had happened in Mexico between Humboldt's departure and Goldschmidt's arrival? In principle, the caste-like organisation of Mexican society that was contingent upon colonialism disappeared with independence from Spain (1821) and the liberal reforms of the mid-nineteenth century. By the time of the Porfirio Díaz regime (1876–1911), all Mexicans stood, in principle, as equal citizens before the law. In reality, as Alan Knight notes, power and privilege continued to be correlated with 'race', a category which was increasingly defined in terms of culture rather than biology alone.³⁷ Hence, for the Porfirian elite, 'being white' was less a biological condition than 'a stage of civilization and a class marker'. 'Whitening' usually meant the transfer of European mores into a countryside mostly inhabited by indigenous peoples who, allegedly primitive and ignorant, should be assimilated and acculturated, by force if necessary.³⁸ The Mexican Revolution of 1910 did not put an end to the 'Indian problem' but simply redefined it: a new discourse known as *indigenismo* promised to rescue the indigenous peoples from their 'backwardness' while respecting their cultures. This promotion of

das Weltbewußtsein (The French Revolution gave birth to national consciousness, the Russian Revolution gives birth to a global consciousness)'.

³⁴ On the reception of the 1917 Revolution in Argentina, including the role played by Goldschmidt in Córdoba, see Roberto Pittaluga, *Soviets en Buenos Aires. La izquierda de la Argentina ante la revolución en Rusia*, Buenos Aires 2015.

³⁵ Goldschmidt and Vasconcelos met in Buenos Aires, where Vasconcelos was on a government mission to promote a positive image of Mexico in Latin America. During the Second World War, Vasconcelos drifted to pro-Nazi positions. See Héctor Orestes Aguilar, 'Ese olvidado nazi mexicano de nombre José Vasconcelos', *Istor*, 8/30 (2007), 148–57.

³⁶ Alfons Goldschmidt, 'Die halbe Welt', unpublished manuscript, p. 155. Universitätsarchiv, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, file 195. See also Alfons Goldschmidt, *Argentinien*, Berlin 1923, especially the chapter titled 'India', pp. 99–100.

³⁷ Alan Knight, 'Racism, Revolution and *Indigenismo*: Mexico, 1910–1940', in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940*, ed. Richard Graham, Austin 1990, pp. 71–113 (pp. 72–4).

³⁸ Jürgen Buchenau, 'The Limits of the Cosmic Race. Immigrant and Nation in Mexico, 1850–1950', in *Immigration and National Identities in Latin America*, ed. Nicola Foote and Michael Goebel, Gainesville 2014, pp. 66–90 (p. 73).



Figure 1. Alfons Goldschmidt on his way to Mexico in 1923. Reproduced with permission from the Universitätsarchiv, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

indigenous cultures was subsumed into the dominant rhetoric of *mestizaje*, according to which modern Mexicans proudly assumed their double heritage as both indigenous and European. Even if this rhetoric had the virtue of extolling miscegenation at a time when eugenicists on both sides of the Atlantic were giving free reign to their ‘phobia about mixing’, Mexico’s indigenous peoples had little to gain from it other than assimilation into a national project.³⁹ Most significantly, such rhetoric did not banish racism from Mexican society.

During what would be his first stay in Mexico (1923–5) (see Figure 1), Goldschmidt did not fail to observe that, despite their incorporation into the dominant narrative of nationhood, the actual situation of the *indios* had changed little. After all, he claimed, the remedy to their ills did not lie in celebrating folkloric ‘Rasseneigentümlichkeiten (racial peculiarities)’, but in addressing capitalism’s key ‘Eigentümlichkeit (peculiarity)’, that is, the accumulation of riches by the few, not the many.⁴⁰ Moreover,

³⁹ On eugenics, see Garner, *Racisms* (note 14), p. 11.

⁴⁰ Goldschmidt, *Die halbe Welt* (note 36), pp. 204–5; Alfons Goldschmidt, *Tierra y libertad. El desarrollo campesino de México*, Mexico 1940, pp. 5–6.

in contrast to the disgust towards the 'Indioleib (indigenous body)' he encountered in most Europeans that he met in Mexico, Goldschmidt concluded that Mexico's indigenous peoples were neither lazy nor dirty, and traced parallels between their music and visual art and that of Mozart and Van Gogh, respectively.⁴¹ Hence the unique character of Goldschmidt's travelogue, *Mexiko* (1925); its rejection of a biological definition of race sets it apart from contemporary authors.

'Die Rasse ist sozial zu deuten (race is to be defined socially)', claimed Goldschmidt, adding that there were no 'Wesensunterschiede (essential differences)' between human beings of different skin colours other than different 'Intensitätssteigerungen (intensity levels)', namely varying degrees of technological advancement.⁴² According to Goldschmidt, a concept like 'Zivilisation (civilisation)' could not be used as a measure of success: it certainly brought material progress, but it was often accompanied by the capitalistic exploitation of both the people and their environment. For him, the realm that the Mexican *indios* inhabited was that of 'Kultur (culture)', revealed by their organic and harmonious relationship with their surroundings.⁴³ It can be added that Goldschmidt subsumed Mexico's indigenous peoples into a broader category, that of 'der braune Mensch (the brown men)', which also encompassed the impoverished masses of Latin America. But this was not a merely Marxist move: it also reflected Goldschmidt's acknowledgement of how artificial and pointless racial taxonomies were, as he was convinced that 'aus Vermischungen entstehen die Völker (all peoples are born from mixture)'.⁴⁴

What truly distinguishes Goldschmidt from contemporary German accounts on Mexico is that he dispensed with the idea of racial purity altogether, especially as his experiences in Mexico came to shape his own perception of Germany. The starting point for *Deutschland heute* (1928) was a trip that Goldschmidt took in the company of General Celestino Gasca in a bid to strengthen commercial links between Mexico and Germany.⁴⁵ The experience of touring Germany with his Mexican friend, an 'Indioprolet (a proletarian *indio*)' who was often discriminated against or underestimated, convinced Goldschmidt that Germans undertook commercial exchanges with non-European countries in the conviction that: 'Die braunen Kaffern mit Feder im Haar, denen wollen wir mal zeigen, was Zivilisation ist (Let's show them, the brown Kaffirs with feathers in their hair, what civilisation is)'.⁴⁶ Hence in *Deutschland heute*, a book that Kurt Tucholsky described as 'eine mutige Tat (a brave deed)', Goldschmidt made a strong plea

⁴¹ Alfons Goldschmidt, *Mexiko* (1925), Leipzig 1985, pp. 129 and 148–9.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 111 and 180.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 54 and 126–7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁵ Goldschmidt, 'Die halbe Welt' (note 36), pp. 168, 172 and 180.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 169–70.

for the abandonment of racial prejudice in Germany.⁴⁷ German workers were being reduced to a 'geistige Schrebergärtnerei (allotment garden mentality)', he contended, insofar as 'Erhalter des Deutschtums (sustainers of Germanness)' were encouraging them to believe that their true enemies were the Poles or the Jews. As an antidote to right-wing nationalism, Goldschmidt invoked a return to the 'globaler Geist (global spirit)' of the poet Heinrich Heine (1791–1856), who had made the Aztecs part of German culture.⁴⁸

'Deutschland ist Mischland (Germany is a mixed country)' – concluded Goldschmidt.⁴⁹ As with every other country, he affirmed, it resulted from the sum of many peoples, so it was impossible to claim that every single German was the expression of a unique racial prototype. He also recounted how contemplation of the portrait of an indigenous Mexican woman called Luziana, drawn by the artist Jean Charlot (1898–1979), had convinced him that a single individual embodied universal human features and, as such, could not be considered as being fundamentally dissimilar to the rest (see Figure 2).⁵⁰ Within Germany, this applied equally to the Jews, who constituted '1%' of Germany's population, a 'mitgerissene, mitverstumpfte, mitgeschichtete Minderheit (a minority that, having been torn and dulled as much as the rest, was part of a common history)', which was no different to other Germans, either in appearance or in behaviour. Race, Goldschmidt concluded, was a void yet dangerous concept:

⁴⁷ Kurt Tucholsky, 'Alfons Goldschmidt. Deutschland heute' (1929), <https://www.textlog.de/tucholsky-deutschland-heute.html> (accessed 1 April 2021).

⁴⁸ Goldschmidt implicitly refers to the poem 'Vitzliputzli' (from Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war), published by Heine in 1851.

⁴⁹ Goldschmidt added humorously: 'Gottenahe Niederdeutsche, germanennahe Westfalen und Friesen, keltennahen Oberdeutsche, slavennahe Ostelbier. [...] Grenz-mischungen, Innenmischungen, Mischungen im Norden, Süden, Osten und Westen, kurzschädliche Germanen, halblangschädliche Germanen, langschädliche Germanen und ebensolche Mischlinge mit entsprechenden Schädelformen (Low Germans are close to God, Westphalians and Frisians are close to the Germanic peoples, Upper Germans are close to the Celts, East Elbians are close to the Slavs. [...] An assortment can be found at the borders, in the interior, as well as in the North, South, East and West: Germans with short skulls, Germans with half-long skulls, Germans with long skulls, and indeed people of mixed heritage with corresponding skull shapes)'. See Alfons Goldschmidt, *Deutschland heute*, Berlin 1928, p. 106.

⁵⁰ Goldschmidt's Luziana was actually Luz Jiménez González, a Nahuatl woman native of Milpa Alta (southeast of Mexico City) who introduced many left-wing artists and intellectuals to Mexico's indigenous heritage. She also worked as a model for the Mexican painters Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, as well as for the Italian photographer Tina Modotti. See Ruth Gómez and Carlos Villasana, 'Luz Jiménez, la mujer nahua que vemos en monumentos y murales', *El Universal*, 28 February 2021, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/opinion/mochilazo-en-el-tiempo/luz-jimenez-la-mujer-nahua-que-vemos-en-monumentos-y-murales> (accessed 1 March 2021); and Natasha Varner, 'Meet Luz Jiménez: the forgotten indigenous woman at the heart of Mexico's cultural revolution', *Global Post*, 20 March 2018, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-03-20/meet-do-luz-jim-nez-forgotten-indigenous-woman-heart-mexico-s-cultural-revolution> (accessed 1 March 2021).



Figure 2. 'Portrait of Luz Jiménez', by Jean Charlot (1898–1979). Dated: June 1924. Paper and pencil. 11 × 15 1/4 in. Signed. Photograph by Philip Spalding III. © The Jean Charlot Estate LLC. With permission to publish from the copyright-holder.

Schön ist der Mensch, wenn er edel ist, in Asien und Indien, in Afrika und Europa, in Amerika und Australien. Wenn er homogen ist, ausgewogen, nicht gequetscht, unpreßt, verändert, fußverkrüppelt, gliedverrenkt im Busch oder Schönheitsalon von den Quälern auf Gottkommando oder Geldkommando. [...] Es gibt Tempi, Intensitäten, Dimensionen, aber Rassen im Sinne der Rasseideologen gibt's nicht. Schönheit gibt's überall, Weisheit, Verborgenheit und Dummheit. Wo sind Rassewirkungen nachweisbar, wo ist mehr als Rasseanmaßung, Rasselüge, Rassepolitik?⁵¹

A person is beautiful when s/he is noble, whether in Asia, India, Africa, Europe, America or Australia. When s/he is homogeneous, balanced, not squeezed, pressed, disfigured, crippled, disfigured in the jungle or in the beauty salon by tormentors following the dictates of either God or money [...] There are tempi, intensities, dimensions, but races as described by race ideologists do not exist. Beauty is everywhere, along with wisdom, deceit and

⁵¹ Goldschmidt, *Deutschland heute* (note 49), pp. 103–4.

stupidity. Where are the effects of race provable, where are these anything other than racial arrogance, racist lies and racial politics?

An interesting contrast to Goldschmidt is B. Traven's *Land des Frühlings* (*Land of Spring*) (1928), a travelogue charting a trip through the southern state of Chiapas. Despite Traven's many gifts as a writer who was to give the indigenous peoples of Mexico a place in world literature in novels such as *Die Rebellion der Gehenkten* (*The Rebellion of the Hanged*, 1936), *Land des Frühlings* none the less contains several significantly racist passages.⁵² This can, as Heidi Zogbaum claims, in part be attributed to Traven's decision to define the *indio* in biological rather than in social terms, erroneously assuming not only that 90 per cent of the Mexican population was working class but also that it was mostly composed of pure-blooded *indios*.⁵³ This suited his argument that the Mexican Revolution symbolised the awakening of indigenous culture in the face of European civilisation, fostered by the former's genetic predisposition to oppose capitalist greed and individualism. In this sense, Wulf Köpke claims that 'having left Germany long before 1933, Traven had no inhibitions about the terms race and racial' – in contrast to the later generation of German exiles that either 'shied away from the racial problem' or reduced it to a 'class struggle'.⁵⁴

Yet the – mostly forgotten – writings of Goldschmidt demonstrate his resistance to the current zeitgeist, that is, to the increasing acceptability of scientific racism within Germany. It could be argued that Goldschmidt's experience of discrimination as a Jew in Germany sensitised him against the idea that racial 'purity' was a necessary pre-condition for a nation's greatness. Nevertheless, it cannot be argued that Goldschmidt's anti-racist stance stemmed from his Jewishness alone. For example, he was mortified to read *Ausflug nach Mexiko* (*Trip to Mexico*) (1926) by his friend Leo Matthias, a German-Jewish journalist whom Goldschmidt invited to Mexico. Matthias affirmed that it was due to Mexico's lack of racial homogeneity that it was a weak nation, incapable of producing noteworthy intellectual achievement.⁵⁵ It was against these kinds of views that Goldschmidt wrote *Auf den Spuren der Azteken* (*In the footsteps of the Aztecs*) (1927), where

⁵² Among other things, Traven supported the idea that the offspring of two opposing races was bound to be 'ziemlich minderwertig (quite inferior)' in moral terms, applauded Mexicans' disgust at a potential 'Mischung (mixture)' with the Chinese and commented on the allegedly grotesque proportions that the 'Vermehrung (propagation)' of African Americans had assumed in the US. See B. Traven, *Land des Frühlings*, Frankfurt a. M. 1984, pp. 46–7, 226 and 450–1. Traven never allowed this book to be translated into Spanish, arguing in 1960 that it was 'out of date'. See Anna Lürbke, *Mexikovisionen aus dem deutschen Exil. B. Traven, Gustav Regler und Anna Seghers*, Tübingen 2000, pp. 53–4.

⁵³ Heidi Zogbaum, *B. Traven. A Vision of Mexico*, Wilmington 1992, pp. 50 and 61.

⁵⁴ Wulf Köpke, 'The Indios as Seen by the European Exile Writers with an Emphasis on Exile Legend', in Hans-Bernhard Moeller (ed.), *Latin America and the Literature of Exile*, Heidelberg 1983, pp. 151–80 (p. 171).

⁵⁵ Leo Matthias, *Ausflug nach Mexiko*, Berlin 1926, pp. 58–60, 137–40 and 154–5. Matthias wrote that Mexican men were so rotten because of onanism that they could no longer enjoy marriage, so

he further engaged with contemporary racial thinking. For example, he touched on how the very idea of ‘Reinrassigkeit (racial purity)’, however groundless, was actually inseparable from an urge to detect – and eventually suppress – any ‘fremde[n] Einfluss (foreign influence)’ perceived as a threat.⁵⁶ Mirroring his own agenda as a political activist, Goldschmidt also called attention to how the ‘Rassenmaßung (racial arrogance)’ of white-skinned Europeans and US Americans served to justify the economic exploitation of ‘Farbige (non-whites)’ all over the world, who were thus treated as ‘Proletarier zweiter Klasse (second-class proletarians)’.⁵⁷ At the beginning of 1927, Goldschmidt participated in the International Congress Against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism, held in Brussels on the initiative of Willi Münzenberg, Chair of the International Workers’ Relief, a subsidiary of the Communist International.⁵⁸ Inspired by his newly-won acquaintance with key personalities of the European and American left, as well as with anti-colonial activists from Latin America, Asia and Africa, Goldschmidt started dreaming of ‘die kommende Panamerikanische Union des Proletariats gegen die Panamerikanische Union des Kapitals (the future Pan-American Union of the Proletariat against the Pan-American Union of Capitalists)’.⁵⁹

In 1928, Goldschmidt thus undertook the project of assembling a ‘Forschungsnetz (research network)’ in Latin America – a project in which the historical figure of Humboldt soon became an inescapable point of reference.⁶⁰ Apparently, in 1822, Humboldt himself had entertained ‘den großen Plan eines großen Zentralinstituts der Naturwissenschaften des freien Amerika in Mexiko (the major plan of founding a great Central Institute of Natural Sciences of the free Americas in Mexico)’, a country to which he seriously considered relocating.⁶¹ At any rate, in 1928 Goldschmidt made a six-month trip that took in the US, Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina and

their only way of living a fulfilling life was to engage in either politics or criminal activities. He also claimed that Mexican women had turned Catholic associations into lesbian clubs, and attributed their reputed ugliness to excessive racial mixing.

⁵⁶ Alfons Goldschmidt, *Auf den Spuren der Azteken* (1927), Leipzig 1985, p. 245; Wolfgang Kießling, *Brücken nach Mexiko: Traditionen einer Freundschaft*, Berlin 1989, pp. 136–7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁵⁸ On Goldschmidt’s links to Münzenberg, see Fredrik Petersson, “We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers”. Willi Münzenberg, the League Against Imperialism, and the Comintern’, 1925–1933’, PhD dissertation, Abo Akademi Turku 2013, pp. 91–5.

⁵⁹ Goldschmidt, ‘Die halbe Welt’ (note 36), p. 180.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 203–5.

⁶¹ Motivated by the prospect of ‘mein Leben auf die angenehmste und für die wissenschaft nützlichste Weise in einem Teile der Welt zu beenden, wo ich außerordentlich geschätzt werde (ending my life in the most pleasant and useful way for science in a part of the world where I am extremely valued)’, letter of Alexander von Humboldt to Wilhelm von Humboldt (17 October 1822), cited by Kießling, *Brücken nach Mexiko* (note 56), p. 186.

Brazil.⁶² He envisaged the creation of a series of research institutes, whose remit lay halfway between applied policy and political activism, and which was to be coordinated from a 'Latein-Amerika Wirtschaftsinstitut (Latin American Economics Institute)' based in Berlin.⁶³ Back in Germany, however, Goldschmidt discovered that his trip had all but bankrupted him. His planned institute, meanwhile, failed to take off. Social democrats accused him of being on Moscow's payroll and prevented him from continuing to use Berlin's town hall as a venue for his courses, taught together with the renowned Peruvian exile, Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre.⁶⁴ Increasingly sidelined, Goldschmidt complained bitterly about the disregard for Latin America's 'Geistesleistungen (intellectual achievements)' that allegedly prevailed in German academic circles, 'für die Marburg himmelhoch über Mexiko steht (for whom Marburg is infinitely superior to Mexico)'.⁶⁵ In 1930, Goldschmidt was deeply hurt to learn that a new, generously funded 'Iberoamerikanisches Institut (Ibero-American Institute)' had just been founded in Berlin – later to be assiduously used by Nazi propagandists.⁶⁶ The very name of the Institute, argued Goldschmidt, was an affront to Humboldt's legacy because 'er kämpfte mit seiner Wissenschaft für ein freieres Lateinisch-Amerika und nicht für den Fortbestand des spanisches Einflusses (he fought with his science for a freer Latin America and not for the continuation of Spanish influence)'.⁶⁷

It might be stressed that Goldschmidt's views did find an echo among his contemporaries, as illustrated by a mostly forgotten book written by the educator and cultural policy maker Adolf Reichwein (1898–1944), *Mexiko erwacht (Mexico awakens)* (1930). The arguments Reichwein wielded in support of the Mexicans' struggle against 'Wallstreet und Rom' (i.e. the US financial capital and the Catholic Church) are strongly

⁶² For a description of the trip, see Alfons Goldschmidt, *Die dritte Eroberung Amerikas. Bericht von einer Panamerikareise*, Berlin 1929.

⁶³ In Mexico, for example, Goldschmidt supervised the foundation of a short-lived but influential Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas staffed with left-leaning Mexican intellectuals such as Jesús Silva Herzog and Daniel Cosío Villegas, as well as with international communist figures such as Julio Antonio Mella (from Cuba) and Fritz Bach (from Switzerland). See Jesús Silva Herzog, *Una vida en la vida de México*, Mexico 1986, pp. 86–8; Goldschmidt, 'Die halbe Welt' (note 36), pp. 203–5.

⁶⁴ Goldschmidt, 'Die halbe Welt' (note 36), pp. 195–6 and 213. This marked the beginning of a difficult period for Goldschmidt. Apparently, he found solace in remembering the words uttered by the 'mexikanische India' Juliana (one of the names employed by Luz Jiménez), when confronted with the 'dishonour' of having had a child out of wedlock: 'Meine Würde habe ich nicht verloren (I haven't lost my dignity)'.

⁶⁵ Alfons Goldschmidt, 'Wieder in der Heimat', *Die Weltbühne*, 25/1 (1929), 287–90; 'Die halbe Welt' (note 36), pp. 213–5.

⁶⁶ See Friedrich E. Schuler, 'Vom Kulturinstitut zum SS-Institut? Das Ibero-Amerikanische Institut im Dritten Reich', in *Ein Institut und Sein General: Wilhelm Faupel und das Ibero-Amerikanische Institut in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Reinhard Liehr, Günther Maihold and Günter Vollmer, Frankfurt a. M. 2003, pp. 351–408.

⁶⁷ Alfons Goldschmidt, 'Ibero-Amerika?', *Die Weltbühne*, 26/2 (1930), 699–701.

reminiscent of Goldschmidt's. In addition, Reichwein also drew inspiration from Humboldt, 'weil er nämlich mit seinem Herzen das Herz des mexikanischen Volkes gesucht hat (because he sought with his heart the heart of the Mexican people)'.⁶⁸ According to Reichwein, Humboldt had always favoured 'Vernunft (reason)' over 'Zwang (force)' as the basis of education for both children and 'Völker (peoples)', including the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Lastly, it can be argued that contemporary German expertise on Mexico, especially as expressed in the genre of 'Sachbücher (non-fiction)', usually pursued much more conservative aims. That was so in the case of Karl Sapper (1866–1945), who might have shown Humboldt-like precision in the compilation of data for his book *Mexico* (1928), but ultimately sought to encourage his 'tüchtige (efficient)' and 'tatkräftige (energetic)' countrymen to strengthen 'die deutsche Position (the German position)' in Mexico.⁶⁹

Shortly before Adolf Hitler's ascent to power, Goldschmidt fled Nazi persecution and began his journey into exile: first to the Soviet Union (1932–3), then to the United States (1933–8) and, finally, to Mexico (1939–40). Writing in 1934, Goldschmidt affirmed that German-Latin American relations should rest upon 'einen Austausch von gleich zu gleich (an exchange between equals)', and arrived at the conclusion that the only way to further German culture was to enrich it 'mit frischen Erkenntnissen aus fremden Ländern (with fresh findings from foreign countries)' – just as Humboldt had done before him.⁷⁰ That same year, after receiving the news that his doctoral title had been annulled, Goldschmidt also referred to the legacy of Humboldt when expressing his disagreement with the decision. In the *Kosmos*, as Goldschmidt wrote to the Rector of Freiburg University, Humboldt had laid the foundations of 'moderne Geographie (modern geography)', seen as resting upon the perpetual drive towards 'Veränderlichkeit (mutability)' that he believed was characteristic of both nature and humans. Yet Hitler had put forward an idea of geography that Goldschmidt believed was a complete antithesis to Humboldt's: for the Nazis, the surface of Germany was to become a 'Paradefeld (a military parade ground)' and the whole planet nothing more than the 'Basis zur Realisierung einer starren Utopie aus Blut und Dummheit (basis for the realisation of an immutable utopia made of blood and stupidity)'.⁷¹ As will be seen, the name of Humboldt was invoked by friends and foes of the Nazi regime alike, and was soon caught up in the acute political infighting that led to the Second World War.

⁶⁸ Adolf Reichwein, *Mexiko erwacht*, Leipzig 1930, p. 56.

⁶⁹ Karl Sapper, *Mexico. Land, Volk und Wirtschaft*, Vienna 1928, pp. 61 and 66–8.

⁷⁰ Alfons Goldschmidt, 'Aufgabe der Deutschen in Amerika [1934]', *Freies Deutschland*, 2 Jahrgg./Nr. 2 (January 1943), 21.

⁷¹ This letter (New York, 29 December 1937) is reproduced in Alfons Goldschmidt, *Große Liebe – weite Welt oder Zwischen Rio Bravo und Moskwa. Reise- und Zeitbilder 1920–1940*, ed. Ruth Greuner, Berlin 1974, pp. 302–5.

HUMBOLDT: A CONTESTED BANNER

In 1944, a certain 'Alejandro Humboldt' was blacklisted as a Nazi sympathiser in a directory of suspect German and Japanese nationals compiled by the British Embassy in Mexico.⁷² Although this was obviously a bureaucratic mishap, the fact remains that the Sociedad Mexico-Alemana Alejandro de Humboldt (Deutsch-Mexikanische Humboldt Gesellschaft), as well as its president, the businessman and bibliophile Carlos Linga (1877–1963), had fallen into disrepute. The Humboldt Gesellschaft had been founded in 1934 as a joint initiative of the German legation and the Mexican branch of the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Partei Deutschlands).⁷³ It thus displaced the Deutsch-Mexikanische Vereinigung, a well-respected organisation established for the purpose of coordinating German-Mexican scientific exchange. Although it had relative success in promoting German interests among Mexico's medical and military elite, the Humboldt Gesellschaft failed to attract a significant number of Mexicans who, as Schuler argues, 'were not fooled by Nazi science'.⁷⁴ German business was coerced into financing the new party-controlled organisation, for which it was hard to find 'a respected Mexican or German individual' willing to act as president.⁷⁵

What were the reasons then behind Carlos Linga's decision to lead the Humboldt Gesellschaft (1934–9)? In 1894, the seventeen-year-old Linga, a native of Hamburg, arrived in Mexico, where he painstakingly climbed the social ladder, making a fortune out of the sugar trade and becoming the representative of several banks and companies.⁷⁶ In parallel, Linga built expertise in Mexico's pre-hispanic and colonial history, and began assembling a valuable book collection – which, in 1957, he took back to Hamburg, where it became the Linga Bibliothek and 'Ibero-Amerika Haus'. Humboldt was revered by Linga who, as a president of the Humboldt Gesellschaft, actively sought to enhance the Mexican public's memory of the Prussian scholar. In 1934, Linga oversaw the purchase of the house where Humboldt had stayed in 1803 during his visit to the silver-mining town of Taxco, south of Mexico City, which was then turned into 'Casa Humboldt' with the aim of promoting German-Mexican cultural exchange. In addition, Linga cultivated a friendship with a relative of Humboldt's,

⁷² 'Statutory list. Lista negra británica México. 10th April 1944. Subject to changes', Archivo de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (ASRE), Mexico City, III-680-5.

⁷³ Officially banned in 1941, one year before Mexico declared war on the Axis. See Jürgen Müller, 'El NSDAP en México: historia y percepciones, 1931–1940', *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe*, 6 (1995), 89–107 (107).

⁷⁴ Friedrich E. Schuler, *Mexico Between Hitler and Roosevelt. Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934–1940*, Albuquerque 1998, pp. 137–8 and 232.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁷⁶ A biography of Carlos Roberto Linga, as well a description of his book collection, can be found in the information booklet 'Linga Bibliothek' by Wiebke von Deylen (2007), <http://linga-bibliothek.de/> (accessed 12 December 2020).

Wilhelm von Humboldt Dachroeder (1880–1970) who, partly based in Mexico, eventually became a suspect of the country's secret services.⁷⁷ In this instance, Linga mirrored the strategy followed by the Berlin-based Iberoamerikanisches Institut, whose president, General Wilhelm Faupel, secured the support of members of the Humboldt family for the Institute's activities.⁷⁸ In 1945, when Linga tried to have his name removed from the blacklist, he would claim that the Humboldt Gesellschaft had pursued nothing but the kind of 'cultural aims' that had motivated Humboldt's visit to Mexico.⁷⁹ Despite Linga's claims to be a former supporter of the Weimar Republic and pleas written in his favour by intellectuals such as Manuel Gómez Morín and Luis Cabrera (both critical of the left-wing course taken by the Mexican State under president Cárdenas), it became clear to Mexican officials that Linga had been actively promoting Nazi political and economic interests too, for example, by owning shares of a news agency closely linked to the Nazi-aligned German legation.⁸⁰

The case of Linga also illustrates the tensions produced by 'Gleichschaltung' – alignment to Nazi ideology – within Mexico's German-speaking population of approximately 7,000.⁸¹ The conservative and nationalist majority of this German colony welcomed Hitler's 'strongman rule', with its promises to quench communism and restore Germany's imperial greatness.⁸² However, the German colony's well-established mercantile elite – of which Linga was a paradigmatic example – often resented the growing influence of a younger and more recent generation of German migrants, many of whom would actively promote the foundation

⁷⁷ According to a confidential report dated 1940, the 'Barón de Humboldt' was suspected of being a Nazi agent. In October 1941, labour leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano gave a speech to a mass audience, issuing warnings about Nazi infiltration in Mexico, and calling attention to the propaganda activities undertaken by Linga and the 'grandson of the famous Humboldt'. See Alicia Gojman de Backal, 'Judíos y alemanes durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial en México', in A. Gojman (ed.), *La memoria archivada. Los judíos en la configuración del México plural*, Mexico 2011, pp. 257–80 (p. 273); and Vicente Lombardo Toledano, 'Cómo actúan los nazis en México', *Obra histórica-cronológica IV*, Mexico 1998, VI, pp. 25–68 (pp. 44 and 53).

⁷⁸ Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt. A Metabiography*, Chicago and London 2008, p. 100. Apparently, Wilhelm von Humboldt was twice president of the Sociedad Alemana Mexicanista (Mexican-German Society), founded in 1919. See von Deylen, 'Linga Bibliothek' (note 75), p. 15.

⁷⁹ Letter by Carlos Linga to the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Relations (Mexico City, 2 February 1945), ASRE, Sección Archivo General: III-675-27, III-6131(73)(64)/13153.

⁸⁰ Similarly, see 'Informe sobre el Sr. Carlos R. Linga (México, D.F., April 26, 1945)'. In 1937, Linga had acquired shares in a news agency, Agencias Unidas de México, together with Hans Georg Eversbusch. In 1941, Linga sold his shares to H. G. Eversbusch, Ricardo Eversbusch Jr (who, as Head of the German Chamber of Commerce, had encouraged pro-German Mexican journalists to visit Germany) and Roberto Bürckle. See Schuler, *Mexico* (note 74), p. 138.

⁸¹ See Verena Radkau, 'Los nacionalsocialistas en México', in Brígida von Mentz *et al.* (eds), *Los empresarios alemanes en México y la oposición de derecha a Cárdenas*, 2 vols, Mexico 1988, II, pp. 148–51.

⁸² Jürgen Buchenau, *Tools of Progress. A German Merchant Family in Mexico. 1865–Present*, Albuquerque 2004, pp. 122–8.

of the Nazi party's 'Ortsgruppe Mexiko' in 1931.⁸³ But their tensions, less the product of ideology than of a different social standing, were eventually lessened. Ultimately, Mexico's German mercantile elite gave their support to the Nazis as a way of improving their own position in Mexico. As illustrated by a recent study of Mexico's Boker family, they often did so under the assumption that their support gave an air of respectability to what they perceived as a brash 'plebeian' movement.⁸⁴ In fact, in 1940, it was the businessman Franz Boker who dealt the blow of a 'symbolic setback' to Rüdiger von Collenberg, head of the German legation, when the new building of the Colegio Alemán (German School, founded in 1892) was named after Alexander von Humboldt. This went against the wishes of von Collenberg, who had the name of Paul von Hindenburg in mind, that is, the name of the man who enabled Hitler's rise to power in 1933.

This was a minor setback considering that, within Germany, Humboldt had been 'aryanised' and made to 'inhabit the same world as Hitler' by the Nazi intelligentsia, active at the Iberoamerikanisches Institut as well as elsewhere.⁸⁵ As Rupke states, the lifelong achievements of Humboldt, seen as a confirmation of Germany's vocation as world leader, served to justify 'German claims over the Americas'.⁸⁶ Between 1933 and 1942, the school that bore Humboldt's name included works by Hitler and Goebbels on its curriculum, expelled Jewish students and openly taught Nazi racial ideology.⁸⁷ The Colegio Alemán, as well as the manifold propaganda activities supported by the German legation, were constantly denounced by the Mexican left-wing press and by the first German anti-fascist organisation in Mexico, the Liga Pro Cultura Alemana, founded in 1938. The Liga showcased Mexican intellectuals such as the biologist Enrique Beltrán, who sought to discredit Nazi racial thinking – the idea that there were 'superior' and 'inferior' races – from both scientific and Marxist perspectives.⁸⁸ Soon afterwards, thanks to the arrival in Mexico of a significant number of German-speaking communists, the figure of Humboldt was deliberately turned into an anti-fascist banner. This implicitly affirmed what Linga had refused to admit: that 'cultural aims' do not exist in a political vacuum.

⁸³ The NSDAP grew steadily from 68 individuals in 1932 to 366 in 1938. See Müller, 'El NSDAP' (note 73), p. 90.

⁸⁴ See Buchenau, *Tools of Progress* (note 82), pp. 123–4.

⁸⁵ Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt* (note 78), p. 91.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–7.

⁸⁷ In 1942, when Mexico entered into the Second World War on the side of the Allies, the Mexican authorities were temporarily in charge of the institution – which functioned as a primary school as well as a secondary and high school. See Brígida von Mentz, 'El Colegio Alemán en México. 1894–1942', in von Mentz *et al.* (eds), *Los empresarios alemanes* (note 80), II, pp. 197–250 (pp. 229–34).

⁸⁸ During a brief stint as inspector in the Ministry of Education (1939–1940), Beltrán tried to put an end to the racist teachings of the staff of the Colegio Alemán, but with very moderate success. See E. Beltrán, *Problemas biológicos. Ensayo de interpretación dialéctica materialista. Prólogo de Marcel Prenant*, Monterrey 1945, pp. 153–6, and *Medio siglo de recuerdos de un biólogo mexicano*, Mexico 1977, pp. 208.

If Mexico had experienced a 'first idyll of bohemian radicalism' in the 1920s, exemplified by the 'unusual tolerance' towards left-wing activism that had attracted Goldschmidt to the country, by the mid-1930s, after a spell of political repression, Mexico became a 'haven for left-wing exiles'.⁸⁹ During the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), Mexico cemented its reputation as a revolutionary country, not only through agrarian reforms and the nationalisation of its oil industry but also through the anti-fascist outlook of its international policies. Spurred on in equal parts by humanitarian concern and political expediency, Cárdenas welcomed around 20,000 Spanish Republicans to Mexico in the wake of the Spanish Civil War (1936–9).⁹⁰ Mexico's sympathy for the victims of political persecution was not ideologically clear-cut. After all, Mexico City was not only home to Leo Trotsky – Stalin's greatest enemy – from early 1938 until his murder in 1940, during the Second World War it also hosted the 'second largest centre, after Moscow, of the German communist exile', a group comprising approximately 100 individuals.⁹¹ Among them, there were a significant number of communist 'big names' such as the German writers Anna Seghers and Ludwig Ludwig, the Czech journalists Egon Erwin Kisch and André Simone, the German party cadres Paul Merker and Alexander Abusch, among many others. It might be added that Mexico also hosted anti-Stalinist leftists such as the council communist (i.e. critical of party- and State-led socialism) Otto Rühle, the ex-Communist Gustav Regler and the anarchist Augustin Souchy, to mention a few German-speaking authors.⁹²

The appropriation of Humboldt by opponents to the Nazi regime (1933–45) was, according to Rupke, limited to a 'few [German-speaking] communists living in [Mexican] exile'.⁹³ It can be argued that contemporary Mexico, where the indigenous past was revisited and re-woven in national narratives by post-revolutionary intellectuals, proved to be a favourable place to rethink racial 'hierarchies' and cultural 'otherness'. This can be illustrated by the relationship Alfons Goldschmidt established with the painter Diego Rivera, whose murals in Mexico's most conspicuous buildings affirmed the indigenous roots of modern Mexican identity, as well as with the labour leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano, who rejected the alleged inferiority of the *indios* and called

⁸⁹ Patrick Iber, *Neither Peace nor Freedom. The Cultural Cold War in Latin America*, Cambridge, MA 2015, pp. 24–8.

⁹⁰ For a convincing account of why Cárdenas supported the Spanish Republic – i.e. as an indirect means of combatting right-wing opposition to his regime – see Mario Ojeda, *México y la Guerra Civil Española*, Madrid 2004.

⁹¹ See Heidi Zogbaum, 'Vicente Lombardo Toledano and the German Communist Exile in Mexico, 1940–1947', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 11/2 (2005), 1–27 (1).

⁹² For a vivid account of how diverse the anti-fascist European exile in Mexico was, see Aribert Reimann, *Transnational District. European Political Exile in Mexico City*, Cologne 2020.

⁹³ Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt* (note 78), p. 87.

for an end to their exploitation.⁹⁴ Without denying that the promotion of the pre-Hispanic past was imperfectly translated into tangible benefits for Mexico's living indigenous peoples, the fact remains that both Rivera and Lombardo were among the Mexican intellectuals who left the deepest imprint on Goldschmidt and the next generation of left-wing exiles.⁹⁵ Among these, Renn and Abusch claimed that it was Goldschmidt who, first of all, had actively disseminated the *true* ideas of Humboldt in Mexico. On arrival in Mexico City, Abusch was dismayed to see that the local 'nazistisch verseuchte (Nazi-polluted)' Deutsche Schule bore the name of the Prussian scholar, as this was in stark contradiction to what he regarded as Humboldt's 'humanistische Grundsatzklärung gegen jeglichen Rassenhaß (humanistic declaration of principles against any kind of racial hatred)'.⁹⁶

Vindicating 'Humboldts wie Heines Tradition (Humboldt's as well as Heine's tradition)' became, as Abusch stated in his memoirs, the objective of the communist-led organisation Bewegung Freies Deutschland (1942–6), where Abusch himself played a key role as editor of the monthly *Freies Deutschland*. It was in the pages of this periodical, as Rupke suggests, that the foundations of the 'aggressive denazification of Humboldt' which later took place among East Germany's intelligentsia were laid. The Nazi version of Humboldt, that of an 'imperialist traveller planting seeds of German hegemony in Latin America', was transformed into that of a 'liberator of native peoples' from colonial oppression and slavery.⁹⁷ A pioneering attempt to cast Humboldt as an anti-Nazi icon appeared in the articles published by the German-speaking, Czech-Jewish journalist Kisch (1885–1948) in *Freies Deutschland*. First of all, Kisch noticed, humorously, that Humboldt had become the 'Schutzpatron (patron saint)' of Germans in Latin America, with its plethora of 'Humboldtgesellschaften,

⁹⁴ Diego Rivera illustrated Goldschmidt's book *Mexiko* (1925). Goldschmidt was fascinated by how Rivera claimed to be 'eine Mischung aus Uriel Acosta [Uriel da Costa, heterodox Jewish thinker, 1580–1640] und Indio [a mixture between Uriel Acosta and *indio*]', see Goldschmidt, *Die dritte Eroberung* (note 62), p. 73. On Lombardo, who regarded the Jews and the indigenous peoples of the Americas as being equally victims of racial prejudice, see A. Aclé-Kreysing, 'El antifascismo: un espacio de encuentro entre el exilio y la política nacional. El caso de Vicente Lombardo Toledano en México (1936–1945)', *Revista de Indias*, 267 (2016), 573–609 (594).

⁹⁵ Anna Seghers and Bodo Uhse wrote profusely about Rivera. See Anna Seghers, 'Die gemalte Zeit. Mexikanische Fresken' (1947) and 'Diego Rivera' (1949), in *Aufsätze* (note 2), pp. 214–20 and 297–301; and Bodo Uhse, *Sonntagsträumerei in der Alameda*, Berlin 1961, a novel in which Rivera is the main protagonist. On the mutually beneficial relationship between Lombardo and the German-speaking exiles, see Zogbaum, 'Vicente Lombardo' (note 91) and Aclé-Kreysing, 'El antifascismo' (note 94).

⁹⁶ Abusch, *Mit offenem Visier* (note 1), p. 41. On how Abusch later refused to accept the argument that a cultural organisation, such as Mexico's Humboldt Gesellschaft, could do no wrong in accepting money from the Nazi Party, insofar as this would be 'veredelt (ennobled)' by the pursuit of cultural and scientific aims, see: *Unser Kampf gegen Hitler. Protokoll des ersten Landeskongresses der Bewegung 'Freies Deutschland' in Mexiko*, Mexico 1943, pp. 129–130.

⁹⁷ Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt* (note 78), pp. 116–18 and 120 (on the role played by Abusch in the Humboldt cult in the GDR).

Humboldthäuser, Humboldtwillen (Humboldt societies, Humboldt houses and Humboldt villas). Yet Kisch argued that Humboldt was being 'missbraucht (misused)' by Nazi sympathisers, who wilfully ignored that Humboldt's ideas on humanity 'ohne Rücksicht auf Religion, Nation und Farbe (without discriminating on the basis of religion, nationality and skin colour)' were incompatible with their own 'kleinbürgerliche und pseudowissenschaftliche Rassendünkel (petit bourgeois and pseudo-scientific racial conceit)' – that is, with hatred for both the Jews and the Mexican 'braunhäutige Wilde (brown-skinned savage)'.⁹⁸ Ultimately, it was crucial for Kisch to highlight that neither Humboldt – nor any scientist, for that matter – could be regarded as being a mere 'unpolitischer Naturforscher (apolitical scientist)'. Science was necessarily embedded in power relations, something that Kisch illustrated with the ambition-fuelled intrigues that had taken place in Berlin's Museum of Ethnology after 1933, after it aligned itself with Nazi racial ideology. It appeared that its director, the 'Mexiforscher (expert on Mexico)' Walter Krickeberg, had found an expedient way of getting rid of unwanted colleagues, such as Konrad Theodor Preuss: accusing him of being a Jew.⁹⁹

Kisch put forward a poignant vision of Humboldt as a 'humanist' who believed all human 'races' belonged to a 'single species' but, at the same time, hinted at more controversial aspects of Humboldt's personality and legacy.¹⁰⁰ In a seminal essay written in 1944, Kisch asserted that Humboldt had written his works with one main objective in mind: not to appear as a mere compiler of data so that he deliberately conveyed the impression that all of his knowledge resulted from first-hand experience. In Mexico, according to Kisch, this led Humboldt to downplay the fact that Mexico was not a 'südamerikanischer Urwald (South American jungle)' but 'ein zivilisiertes Land voll wissenschaftliches Treibens (a civilised country with a thriving scientific life)'.¹⁰¹ Keen on keeping the protagonist's role for himself, so the argument went, Humboldt made a point of highlighting that he only managed to visit a few cities during his short stay in Mexico – actually 350 days between 1803 and 1804. On a final point, Kisch stressed how Humboldt's works, which amounted to a veritable 'wissenschaftliche

⁹⁸ E. E. Kisch, 'Der missbrauchte Humboldt', *Freies Deutschland*, 1. Jahrgg./Nr. 7 (Mai 1942), 10–11.

⁹⁹ E. E. Kisch, 'Nazis töten Mexikoforscher', *Freies Deutschland*, 2. Jahrgg./Nr. 2 (January 1943), 13–14. The actual story was much more complicated. Krickeberg had previously joined forces with Preuss against another colleague, Walter Lehmann. Moreover, while Krickeberg never joined the Nazi party and would later portray himself as a 'ein unpolitischer Mensch (an apolitical person)', he did further his own career through the defamation of colleagues such as Preuss and Lehmann who were not Jews, but actually members of the NSDAP. See Norbert Díaz de Arce, 'Plagiatsvorwurf und Denunziation. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altamerikanistik in Berlin (1900–1945)', PhD dissertation, Berlin 2005, <http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/2005/96/index.html> (accessed 14 December 2020).

¹⁰⁰ E. E. Kisch, 'Die wissenschaftliche Conquista', *Freies Deutschland*, 1. Jahrgg./Nr. 7 (Mai 1942), 10–12.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Conquista (scientific conquest)', had been often read as if they were an invitation to exploit the vast riches of the New World. In this sense, Kisch agreed with Goldschmidt in arguing that, after achieving its independence from Spain, Latin America had basically substituted one master with another: instead of the Spanish king, the Spanish colonies were now subservient to European and US foreign capital.¹⁰²

But why did the historical figure of Humboldt retain its mythical status, not only among German antifascists but also in post-revolutionary Mexico? Traditionally, in this country, 'elite xenophilia contrasted with widespread popular xenophobia', due to the fact that immigrants of European or North American origin exercised an influence well beyond their numbers – in 1930, for example, immigrants constituted less than 1 per cent of the Mexican population.¹⁰³ It was no secret that these immigrants engaged in 'practices of self-exclusion' based on what they perceived as being their own racial and cultural superiority – a perception that local elites were often keen to validate.¹⁰⁴ In post-revolutionary Mexico, left-wing intellectuals often called this notion of 'superiority' into question, arguing that it was a mere reflection of economic privilege, brandished not only by citizens of powerful Western nations but also by well-to-do Mexicans.¹⁰⁵ In this context, I argue, Humboldt was recast as the 'good' foreigner, one who came with the mission not to plunder, but to collaborate and who was capable of recognising the country's coming-of-age in terms of its scientific and cultural productions, thus quenching a deep-seated thirst for acknowledgement.

This can be illustrated by an anecdote recounted by the writer Ludwig Renn who, in 1940, was invited to teach modern European history at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo at Morelia, capital of the state of Michoacán in western Mexico.¹⁰⁶ In Morelia, Renn was particularly pleased to make the acquaintance of the Mexican astronomer Guillermo Haro (1913–88), who, proclaiming his confidence in the future of Mexican science, was convinced that an influx of 'Alexander von Humboldts' from across the world were arriving to collaborate with their Mexican peers.¹⁰⁷ But the fact that validation still came from an external source (i.e. European recognition) continued to be problematic. This was also noted by Renn, who told another anecdote, that of a Mexican student who referred positively to a recent staging of Traven's *The Rebellion*

¹⁰² Goldschmidt, *Die dritte Eroberung* (note 62), pp. 75–6 and 233–4.

¹⁰³ Buchenau, 'The Limits of the Cosmic Race' (note 38), p. 67.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Víctor Manuel Villaseñor, 'Por qué soy marxista', *Futuro*, October 1940, 8–9 and 36–8. Villaseñor travelled to the Soviet Union in 1935 and actively supported working-class activism and education; for an account of his life, see his autobiography: *Memorias de un hombre de izquierda*, Mexico 1976, 2 vols.

¹⁰⁶ Ludwig Renn, *Im Spanischen Krieg. Morelia. Eine Universitätsstadt in Mexiko*, Berlin 1983, p. 431.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

of the *Hanged* in Morelia by the Japanese director Seki Sano, yet woefully remarked: 'Ein Ausländer muss zu uns kommen, um die Wahrheit über unser eigenes Volk zu sagen! (A foreigner must come to us, in order to tell us the truth about our own people!)'¹⁰⁸ Lastly, the role played by foreigners – in this case, by Humboldt – in validating local knowledge can be further illustrated by an encounter between the German writer Gustav Regler and Miguel Ángel de Quevedo (1862–1946), a pioneering Mexican environmentalist. Apparently, Quevedo told Regler that it was Humboldt who had first recognised the ecological wisdom of indigenous groups in the central Mexican plateau when they (rightly) told him that the surrounding forests should be preserved because 'sie machen Wasser (they produce water)'.¹⁰⁹

BEYOND HUMBOLDT: RACE AND IDEOLOGY – OR THE ALLEGED LACK OF IT

It seems beyond dispute that Humboldt did not believe 'race' was a valid scientific category and was convinced that all kinds of men were capable of intellectual advancement. This is what I regard, for the purposes of this section, as Humboldt's legacy on 'racial' thinking, on the assumption that a legacy cannot be equated with a cultural imperative, applicable to times that Humboldt neither experienced nor could possibly anticipate. Yet it is still possible to place Humboldt side by side with successive generations of German authors in Mexico because they all share a common feature: they were confronted with cultural differences and interpreted these as being contingent upon historical, economic, climatic and/or 'racial' matters. It can be argued that, for all of them, the appraisal of cultural difference oscillated mostly between two poles: differences were read as being either an unfamiliar variation on a well-known theme, or as positing a gap that could not be breached by either imagination or experience.

Ex post facto readings of the German communist exile – in Mexico and elsewhere – are as dependent upon time and place as those of Humboldt. In this sense, scholarship on the German-speaking exile continues to reflect ideological conflicts within the left – as classically exemplified by rival works on the 'Mexican' exile by the East German historian Wolfgang Kießling (1974) and the West German historian Fritz Pohle (1986).¹¹⁰ Moreover, viewed through a post-1989 lens, communist authors have often been demythologised, whereas anti-Stalinist voices have been vindicated, as in

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 468. On Sano, see Michiko Tanaka, 'Seki Sano and Popular Political and Social Theatre in Latin America', *Latin American Theatre Review*, 27/2 (1994), 53–69 (60).

¹⁰⁹ Gustav Regler, 'Wasser und seine Priester', in G. Regler, *Vulkanisches Land. Ein Buch von vielen Festen und mehr Widersprüchen* (1947), Göttingen 1987, pp. 17–53 (p. 34).

¹¹⁰ Fritz Pohle wrote *Das mexikanische Exil. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der politisch-kulturellen Emigration aus Deutschland. 1937–1946*, Stuttgart 1986, mainly as a reply to Wolfgang Kießling's *Alemania Libre in Mexiko*, Berlin 1974, 2 vols.

the paradigmatic case of Regler.¹¹¹ A good illustration of this is Wulf Köpke's analysis of how political ideologies shaped the way in which European antifascist exiles viewed the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Köpke affirms that 'the more the writers doubted their position, the more they searched for another world [like the ex-communist Regler]', whereas 'the more secure the writers felt in their own ideology [like communists Kisch and Renn]', the less willing they were to enter the 'disturbing realm of the indio'.¹¹² In Mexico, according to Köpke, German communist writers failed to penetrate the 'mentality of the indios' because they were blinded by the imperative of presenting them as proletarians on their way towards acquiring a proper revolutionary consciousness.¹¹³

More recently, despite praising the anti-exotic quality of Kisch's writings on Mexico, Schmidt-Welle nevertheless maintains that Kisch disregarded Mexico's deep, underlying 'ethnische Konflikte (ethnic conflicts)' for the sake of highlighting 'Klassenkonflikte (class struggles)' that corroborated his Marxist world view.¹¹⁴ Whereas it is undeniable that racism continues to prevail in Mexico, there is also the danger of supposing that 'ethnic' categories are objective and clear-cut, rather than subjective and socially defined.¹¹⁵ Therefore, in the scholarship on German and European travellers to Mexico there is a remarkable absence of critical reflection on what is often automatically regarded as being the antithesis of the *indio*, that is, the 'white European' – a category that is neither self-evident nor reducible to a few, easily identifiable 'ethnic' attributes.¹¹⁶

The status and treatment of minorities in Mexico was an issue that went beyond racial taxonomies and sometimes beyond cultural differences, too. In the 1940s, campaigns that aimed to create awareness of the Holocaust in Mexico were carried out by German-speaking exiles as well as by figures of the Mexican left, and precisely highlighted how there was still a common denominator uniting Jews, the indigenous peoples of the Americas and even Mexican migrants to the US: racial discrimination.¹¹⁷ The monthly

¹¹¹ See, for example, Georg Pichler, "Das Exil umschloss uns brüderlich". Gustav Reglers Verwünschtes Land Mexiko als Spiegel des Exiles', in *Por España y el mundo hispánico. Festschrift für Walther L. Bernecker*, ed. Werner Altmann and Ursula Vences, Berlin 2007, pp. 465–85.

¹¹² Köpke, 'The Indios' (note 54), p. 179. Why the realm of the indio *must* be 'disturbing', is not explained.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Friedhelm Schmidt-Welle, *Mexiko als Metapher. Inszenierung des Fremden in Literatur und Massenmedien*, Berlin 2011, pp. 117 and 120.

¹¹⁵ On racism in modern Mexico, see Mónica G. Moreno Figueroa, 'El archivo del estudio del racismo en México', *Desacatos*, 51 (2016), 92–107.

¹¹⁶ On how anti-fascist Germans fighting in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War often used racist stereotypes when referring to Spaniards (seen as dirty, lazy, undisciplined, cowardly, etc.), see Birgit Schmidt, *Wenn die Partei das Volk entdeckt. Anna Seghers, Bodo Uhse, Ludwig Renn, u. a. Ein kritischer Beitrag zur Volksfrontideologie und ihre Literatur*, Münster 2002, pp. 107 and 132–5.

¹¹⁷ A. Acle-Kreysing, 'El exilio de habla alemana y la recepción del Holocausto en México. El caso de "Tribuna Israelita" (1944–1947)', *Verbum et Lingua*, 12 (2018), 83–99.

Tribuna Israelita, founded in 1945 as a joint initiative of German-speaking exiles and the Mexican Jewish community, is a good case in point. This publication undertook several aims at once: to come to terms with crimes committed against the Jewish people and to campaign for creation of the State of Israel while, at the same time, affirming the full membership of Jews – and of other minorities – in European and Latin American social and cultural space.

It is obvious that Goldschmidt, as well as straightforwardly communist authors such as Kisch and Renn, carried out a Marxist reading of Mexico's history. Yet there is a need, I would argue, to distinguish the proposed remedy from the diagnosis, as this might still hold a grain of truth. That can be illustrated with a seemingly trivial anecdote on Mexican 'alte Sitten (traditional customs)' narrated by Renn. In Morelia's town centre, the wife of an exiled Spanish scientist meets an indigenous woman, one of the many street vendors around, and is outraged when the latter refuses to sell all her merchandise at once, claiming that if she returned home early, her husband would beat her. When discussing the episode, Renn does not take the side of the European woman, who is keen to emphasise Mexico's backwardness, but instead defends the indigenous woman, refusing to make her personally responsible for her situation.¹¹⁸ In order to change her life, Renn determines, the indigenous woman must not only change her selling strategy or her husband, but must be able to have 'Vorstellungen (notions)' of how her new life could look. Social change – and here the communist Renn clearly steps forward – is a collective rather than an individual task and, in turn, is closely connected to what Renn considered was the role of literature.

When writing about his experiences as an exile in both Spain and Mexico, the priority Renn set himself was to highlight 'das Großartige des gesunden Kollektivs (the magnificence of the healthy collective)', because it mirrored ideals such as 'proletarische Solidarität (proletarian solidarity)' and 'Rassen-Freundschaft (friendship among races)'.¹¹⁹ This explains why, despite the public recognition he enjoyed during his lifetime as a member of the East German cultural elite, Renn is held in little regard by modern-day German literary critics, who argue that his literary output has but a single virtue, its 'Kadavergehorsam (slavish obedience)' to party dictates.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ He adds that 'der Vorwurf der Rückständigkeit des einzelnen ist ebenso taktlos wie die christliche Mission in fremden Völkern (making an individual responsible for the backwardness of the whole is as tactless as sending Christian missions to foreign peoples)', see Renn, *Im spanischen Krieg* (note 106), p. 525.

¹¹⁹ See Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Deutsche Literatur in West und Ost*, Munich 2002, pp. 289–99; and Edward Reichel, 'Ein Spanienkämpfer ohne Spanienbild: Ludwig Renn', in *Dresden und Spanien. Akten des interdisziplinären Kolloquiums*, ed. Christoph Rodiek, Frankfurt a. M. 2000, pp. 179–89 (180).

¹²⁰ See, for example, the 'Gutachten (reports)' for both *Morelia* and *Im Spanischen Krieg* provided by the Aufbau Verlag, a major East German publishing house that specialised in 'Exilliteratur'. On Renn's willingness to omit 'unerfreuliche Persönlichkeiten (unedifying characters)' in order to give

Regardless of Renn's literary qualities, I contend that what such accounts miss is that Renn was not only a victim – however willingly or unwillingly – of the system, but part of the system itself. He believed in the possibility of creating a type of literature that would instil the *right* political message into its German readership. This was an objective he pursued in collaboration with other East German intellectuals, so it would be wrong to suppose he was blindly following the instructions of anonymous party bureaucrats. In the context of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), common cause was made with communist and progressive regimes in Latin America (and Humboldt was often raised as a shared symbol), so it comes as no surprise that Mexico and Cuba provided the setting for two of Renn's most popular novels addressed to East German youth.¹²¹

The use of Mexico as a vessel for projection, as the case of Gustav Regler further exemplifies, could also serve the purpose of expressing the rejection of political ideologies. In fact, Mexico became the setting of Regler's fall into disgrace as an ex-communist on the receiving end of slanderous accusations from former comrades.¹²² Nowadays, however, Regler is regarded as allegedly the only German author in exile who not only succeeded in capturing the essence of Mexico's 'Indian heritage', but dared to openly criticise 'the Mexican Revolution' while still living in Mexico.¹²³ However, I contend that Regler might have extricated himself from communism but did exactly what his ex-comrades had done – used the *indios* as a trope to illustrate his (political) conviction that 'der Mensch ein *animal* ist, das keine Freiheit verträgt' (a human being is an animal that cannot tolerate freedom).¹²⁴ In consequence, due to what he interpreted as the gullibility of Mexican *indios* when faced with politicians and priests, Regler concluded that they were 'Tiere mit Menschaugen (animals with human eyes)', whose irrational behaviour mimicked the 'Hitze des Klimas

an exemplary character to his account of the Spanish Civil war, see Ludwig Renn to Erich Wendt, Aufbau Verlag (Dresden, 10 January 1951), Aufbau Verlag Archiv, Stadtbibliothek Berlin, SBB-III-A-E0297c-0046-47. This view was strongly supported by Walter Janka: 'Betr.: Ludwig Renn – "Der spanische Krieg"', 30 August 1954, SBB-III-A-Dep38-1162-0120-121. Bodo Uhse was not particularly impressed by *Morelia* (originally titled *Mexico*), which he deemed 'eine antiliterarische Arbeit (an anti-literary work)'. See Bodo Uhse, 'Anlage: Renn, Mexiko', addressed to Erich Wendt, 1 April 1949, SBB-III-A-Dep38-1162-0123.

¹²¹ Ludwig Renn, *Trini. Die Geschichte eines Indianerjungen*, Berlin 1956, and *Der Neger Nobi*, Berlin 1957. On the Latin American cultural policies of the GDR, see Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt* (note 78), p. 136.

¹²² Zogbaum, 'Vicente Lombardo' (note 91), 11–13.

¹²³ Köpke, 'The Indios' (note 54), p. 172; Renata von Hanffstengel, 'La imagen de la Revolución Mexicana en la obra de Bodo Uhse *Sonntagsträumerei in der Alameda* y en sus cuentos mexicanos', in *México, el exilio bien temperado*, ed. Renata von Hanffstengel and Cecilia Tercero, Mexico 1985, pp. 83–7 (83).

¹²⁴ Gustav Regler, 'Liebe, die zerstörende Göttin', in Regler, *Vulkanisches Land* (note 109), pp. 173 and 190.

(the hot weather)' and – in the worst cases – did not qualify as proper humans but as mere 'Urstoff (primordial matter)'.¹²⁵

Finally, it is worth insisting that, in the Mexican context, criticising 'the Revolution' actually means condemning the shortcomings of the country's post-revolutionary leaders in implementing the ideals of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. In this sense, Regler was certainly much more outspoken than others in highlighting the moderate turn taken by Mexican politics during the government of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–6). At the same time, in a *faux pas* that has been overlooked for decades, Regler praised the government of Miguel Alemán (1946–52) for finally enabling Mexicans to defend their individual rights from State encroachment.¹²⁶ Moreover, I would argue that Regler's depiction of Mexican history as a non-stop orgy of violence became an indirect attempt at coming to terms with Germany's recent past. Hence the similarities that can be traced between Amimitl, the bloodthirsty Aztec priest of one of Regler's books, and Adolf Hitler.¹²⁷ In sum, in Regler's Mexican *oeuvre* an unresolved tension remains between, on the one hand, what he considered to be universal human features and, on the other, what he could not explain with reference to his own world view. Writing from Mexico, Regler expressed the conviction that fascism was an 'internationale menschliche Eigenschaft, der Dreck in jedem (international human trait, the dirt in everyone)' but, when confronted with cultural practices that seemed outlandish to him, found refuge in the position of a detached European eyewitness for whom

¹²⁵ Gustav Regler, 'Tod, wo ist dein Stachel?' (p. 122), and 'Liebe, die zerstörende Göttin' (pp. 124–5 and 191), both in Regler, *Vulkanisches Land* (note 109).

¹²⁶ Gustav Regler, 'Schuld und Sühne am Fuß der Pyramiden', in *Verwünschtes Land Mexiko*, Munich 1954, pp. 206–7. Regler credited Francisco González de la Vega, Attorney General under President Alemán, for introducing the 'juicio de amparo' in Mexico's legislation – but in fact this constitutional appeal had existed since 1857. What the government of Alemán actually did was to restore the 'amparo agrario', a specific safeguard that had been suspended in 1933 in order to enable a thorough redistribution of land in a rural Mexico riddled with inequality. By once again enabling individual landowners to oppose the expropriation of their properties by the State, agrarian reforms were practically brought to a standstill. See Vicente Fernández and Nitza Samaniego, 'El juicio de amparo: historia y futuro en la protección constitucional de México', *Revista IUS*, 27/5 (2011), 173–200 (181–2); and Emilio Kourí, 'La promesa agraria del artículo 27', *Nexos* (February 2017), <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=31269#ftnref30> (accessed 23 February 2020).

¹²⁷ The inspiration for Amimitl was the Codex Boturini, a graphic depiction of the main events in the centuries-long migration of the Aztec people from mythical Aztlán to what is today Mexico City. Regler portrayed this migration as having taken place within a single generation, led by the fictitious priest Amimitl – actually the name of a secondary deity. Obsessed by territorial expansion, Amimitl imposes his will through terror, sacrificing human beings and feeding their roasted remains to hungry crowds. This leads Regler to raise a question: 'Wie kann ein einzelner ein Volk zum Größenwahnsinn treiben, wenn nicht ein Keim dazu in den Seelen der vielen schon lag? (How can a single individual drive a nation to megalomania, if there was not previously a germ for it in the soul of the many?)'. See Gustav Regler, *Amimitl oder Die Geburt eines Schrecklichen*, Saarbrücken 1947, p. 52; and Teresa Cañadas García, 'Mexiko im literarischen (Nach)Exil', in Bettina Bannasch und Katja Sarkowsky (eds), *Nachexil/Post-Exile*, Berlin and Boston 2020, pp. 179–96 (p. 185).

there could be no 'Verwandtschaft (relationship)' between him and what he observed.¹²⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Rethinking a controversial concept such as 'race' in the framework of Humboldt's reception by left-wing German writers in Mexico in the 1920s to 1940s brings me to reflect on how their writings sought to convey differences and – at the same time – imagined commonalities. They staged a complex interplay between biological determinism, positing physiology and genetics as the main explanation of human behaviour, and cultural relativism, grounded on the idea that there were universal and cross-cultural traits among humans. Few, however, were able to see Europe with Mexican eyes and to realise, as Goldschmidt did, that people in the Americas were not condemned to a preordained destiny by virtue of their 'race' and geography, but that they lived 'menschlich, halb-menschlich oder unmenschlich [...] mit Dimensions- und Intensitätsunterschieden, dieselben wie bei uns (in human, semi-human or inhuman conditions [...]) that, despite differences in terms of extent and intensity, are exactly the same as ours)'.¹²⁹

Invoking the name of Humboldt together with that of Goldschmidt serves less the purpose of engaging in prescriptive or meta-historical arguments, but tends rather to call attention to the asymmetry that still prevails in the reception of their works. As Cañizares-Esguerra reminds us, the idea that scientific exchange between Humboldt and his colleagues in Spanish America was 'one-way only' continues to be pervasive. With regard to German communist exiles in Mexico, while there is abundant scholarship on how Mexico served as a literary means of conveying a political message to German-speaking audiences, there is still scant research on how these German exiles interacted with local politicians, intellectuals and artists. While explanations based on 'race' are widely discredited, accounts that present Mexico as an irredeemably exotic place – that is, inherently different from Europe – are far from being an exception, as in the book just published by Volker Weidermann, a popular German literary critic, about the years (1941–7) spent by Anna Seghers as an exile in the 'Pistolenland (gun land)' of Mexico.¹³⁰ When a writer observes through the lens of exoticism, as Weidermann does, Mexicans are only interesting insofar as they posit a wild and colourful background to tragedy-stricken Europeans.

¹²⁸ Gustav Regler, *Sohn aus Niemandland. Tagebücher 1940–1943*, ed. Gerhard Schmidt-Henkel and Ralph Schock, Basel and Frankfurt a. M. 1994, p. 548 (diary entry of 12 December 1941); Gustav Regler, 'Tod, wo ist dein Stachel?', in Regler, *Vulkanisches Land* (note 109), p. 97 – where the author describes the celebration of the Day of the Dead in the western state of Michoacán.

¹²⁹ Alfons Goldschmidt, 'Amerika –?', *Die Weltbühne*, 26 Jahrgg./2. Halbjahr (1930), 175–7.

¹³⁰ Volker Weidermann, *Brennendes Licht. Anna Seghers im mexikanischen Exil*, Berlin 2020.

In Weidemann's book, the only Mexicans worth paying attention to are either eccentric, Aztec-loving artists or unscrupulous politicians, while the cosmopolitan intellectuals who held opinions on German figures such as Goethe and Humboldt, or Marx and Hitler, and interacted with German-speaking exiles in universities and cultural organisations, remain conspicuously absent.¹³¹

In sum, by discussing the legacy of Alexander von Humboldt, an incontrovertible figure who has marked two centuries of Mexican-German relations, I have traced a longer chain of notions about 'race', espoused by writers like Goldschmidt, Traven, Kisch, Renn and Regler, showing how the influence of scientific racism in Germany on the eve of National Socialism was indeed strong, yet neither fatal nor inescapable. I would contend that the common thread running from Humboldt, the aristocratic Prussian scholar, to Goldschmidt, the outcast German-Jewish Marxist intellectual, despite differences in time and place, is not only that they aimed to portray dissimilarities in a scientific, or at least in a neutral way. Their works also allowed those formerly treated as mere objects to become subjects in their own right, able to return the gaze trained upon them. Thus, not only cultural difference – but especially cultural sameness – ceased to be perceived as a threat.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

¹³¹ Cf. A. Acle-Kreysing, 'Cómo crear una clase obrera marxista y antifascista: la participación del exilio alemán en la Universidad Obrera de México en las décadas de 1930 y 1940', *Dimensión antropológica*, 74 (2018), 109–49.