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Alexander von Humboldt's Cosmopolitan Thought and the Earth Charter*



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Introduction

In his work "Perpetual Peace," Immanuel Kant expressed the view that "the application of law across the entire surface of the earth... would ultimately result in a cosmopolitan constitution" (Kant, 1795/1999, p. 329). A global constitutional order signifies, above all, the universal belief in the need to search for basic values and norms that unite people from all nations and cultures. Over the past decades, in response to the growing and inevitable global interconnectedness, numerous initiatives seeking to create a global constitution have emerged. It is evident, therefore, that Kant's dream of establishing a cosmopolitan constitution is not entirely unattainable. On the contrary, considering the many transboundary elements we share such as oceans, rivers and air (and water and air pollution), humanity certainly needs a code of ethics and values, a charter of common rights and responsibilities. Hence, the search for and the ongoing debate about a global constitutional order makes sense.

To partially address this challenge, particularly regarding the fragmentation of environmental governance instruments, jurists and governments worldwide have considered and proposed the creation of the Global Pact for the Environment as a way to better articulate existing environmental law instruments. [1] A regional-level example is the European Green Deal, a European ecological pact, which is an initiative of the European Commission that seeks to generate a green revolution in the European continent. Here, the commitment among all member states

is to make Europe carbon neutral by 2050. With the approval of the European Climate Law, this political commitment becomes a legal obligation across nations in that continent. (European Commission, n.d.)

For Klaus Bosselmann [2019], a form of global constitutionalism can be seen through the developments in national constitutions, often with similar principles. For it appears that over the last 25 years, complementing the development of international law, there has been a "greening" of national constitutions in the sense of growing recognition of the essentiality of environmental rights and duties (Bosselmann, 2019). The dual development of national and international environmental constitutionalism allows us to observe a global trend, even if incipiently, towards a world constitutional order or global constitution (Bosselmann, 2015). Still according to Bosselmann, the real viability of a global constitution reveals numerous preliminary issues to be resolved, such as the problems of legitimacy [2015]. In any case, although the drafting of a global constitution is still idealistic, the discourse on global constitutionalism has generated many ideas around a global constitution-type document. For Bosselmann, the Earth Charter is undoubtedly the best example of a document with a purpose to comply with a global constitution [2015].

In this context, the Earth Charter presents itself as an interface between global ethics and international law, between good intentions, aspirations and politics, and, in



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a way, at the forefront of a vision of international constitutional order. Indeed, this article reaffirms the desirability of a global constitutional order, notably in the field of environmental law, with the Earth Charter playing a central role, as it can be considered to be a solid ethical foundation for a global constitution model.

For Febres, when discussing global governance and sustainable development democracy is assumed to be the ideal political context, knowing that it is an essential condition, depending, however, on other elements [2015]. In this sense, Febres summarizes, “the values introduced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, by the various international declarations on environment and development and, in particular, by the Earth Charter, due to its high level of participatory consensus, become necessary references that give an axiomatic basis to governance” [2015 p. 20].

Febres goes further considering it correct and opportune to characterize the Earth Charter as a *sui generis* instrument [2015, p. 255]: rich in legal diversity, with principles that follow different orders and classifications in different instruments (even in different normative orders), but that, within the scope of the Earth Charter, all of them have a systemic and non-hierarchical treatment. Furthermore, she believes that this is what makes the Earth Charter a different instrument because it incorporates eminently moral connecting norms, modeling an ethicalization of international environmental law and laws related to sustainable development.

However, on the path to get to the Earth Charter, it is essential to visit Alexander von Humboldt [Bonpland and Humboldt, 2018], as he was the one who set sail towards the new world in search of scientific evidence to demonstrate the interconnection of all nature and its relationship with humanity and to justify the development of transnational protection rules in the field of international environmental law.



According to Andrea Wulf [2016], Alexander von Humboldt was the founding father of the environmental sustainability concept. As such, we could argue that his thoughts significantly influenced the development of international environmental law and, possibly consequently, the vision of the Earth Charter itself. Almost 200 years ago, Humboldt described Earth as a living organism, where everything is connected, from the tiniest insect to the largest and tallest trees. According to Laura Dassow Walls [2009], Humboldt united art and science when he said that we must use our imagination and our feelings to understand nature.

Therefore, Humboldt's perception of Earth as a living organism and recognition of the interdependence embodied in a global living society (an observation also made by Kant) is translated into modern times through the Earth Charter which affirms that "Earth is alive with a unique community of life" and in addition, it stresses our identity as an "Earth Community" (Earth Charter Commission, 2000).



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It is therefore essential to explain Humboldt's influence on international environmental law and, consequently, on the inspiration for the key ideas embedded in the Earth Charter. So let us first introduce Humboldt and his key ideas.

Who was Alexander von Humboldt? And what is his Relationship with the Earth Charter?

According to Harvey [1998, 2020], Alexander von Humboldt was a Prussian scientist who lived from 1769 to 1859. He traveled over 64,000 kilometers across the four continents, wrote 36 books and corresponded with 25,000 people. In fact, for many historians and biographers, Humboldt was one of the most esteemed men of the 19th century! [2]

In general, the name Alexander von Humboldt is more known among geographers, biologists, and naturalists. He is also highly recognized in the countries where he extensively traveled and conducted his explorations, including Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and especially the United States. Humboldt, being a naturalist, mining engineer, philologist, geographer and having many other specialties, embarked on an incredible exploration through Spanish America starting in 1799 [Harvey, 2020].



According to the Spanish researcher and historian Miguel Ángel Puig Samper Mulero [2007], Humboldt was born in 1769, on the outskirts of Berlin, to a wealthy family. Wilhelm von Humboldt, philosopher, diplomat and founder of the Humboldt University of Berlin, who was the architect of the Humboldtian education ideal, was Alexander's older brother.

As mentioned above, Alexander von Humboldt left behind a life of privilege and embarked on a five-year exploration of Latin America, where he spent nearly all of his inheritance. It was a journey that shaped his life and way of thinking, ultimately allowing him to become known throughout the world. Humboldt's scientific work has inspired many other scientists to this day.

For instance, Charles Darwin said that he would not have embarked on the "Beagle" and, therefore, may not have conceived the "Origin of Species" without Humboldt [Darwin, 2003]. As a young man, Darwin read Humboldt's book "Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent during the years 1799-1804", which was part travelogue and part scientific treatise based on Humboldt's explorations in Latin America.

According to his biographers, Humboldt indeed influenced Darwin in various ways. Firstly, the descriptions of Latin America were actually the reason for Darwin's desire to explore it himself. Once in Latin America, Darwin saw this new world through the lens of Humboldt's books, as can be inferred from his initial writings

upon his arrival in Brazil, "I am at the present fit only to read Humboldt, he like another Sun illuminates everything I behold" [Wulf, 2016, p. 297].

According to Puig, Humboldt dedicated his entire life to his passion to search for relationships between the inorganic and the organic, the harmonies and connections of nature. In short, he aimed to understand the Cosmos, the entire cosmology of the 18th century and accomplished this goal towards the end of his life by writing a series of books titled "Cosmos" [Puig, 2015].

Humboldt was a lifelong abolitionist; he believed in the innate equality of all races and wrote about it frequently. Therefore, he criticized the slavery he witnessed in Latin America and the United States. According to Harvey [2020], Humboldt's commitment to equality was not just related to American slavery. He was involved in and advocated for equality among all races and in all places. Throughout the four years he spent in South America, he always hired local people to guide him. He did the same during his time in the United States, as he was interested in learning from native communities whom he respected and admired for their knowledge. He did not consider them to be inferior, contrary to the majority of European explorers of the time. This consideration of human dignity can be found reflected in Principle 12 of the Earth Charter which states, "Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily



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health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities” (Earth Charter Commission, 2000).

We can see Humboldt's spirit and ideas, of love for nature and humanity, reflected throughout the Earth Charter.

The Cosmopolitan Thinking of Alexander von Humboldt and the Earth Charter

"Alles ist in Wechselwirkung!" [3]

Humboldt presented a concept of nature that still greatly influences our way of thinking today. He described Earth as a living organism (Wulf, 2016), where everything is connected, from the tiniest insect to the largest and tallest trees. Therefore, significant similarities and coincidences between Humboldt's thinking and the Earth Charter can easily be observed.

It is worth highlighting that the Earth Charter is a declaration of interdependent

principles, formulated from an ethical perspective, that constitute common foundations for humanity. It was developed building upon existing international instruments, treaties and conventions, as well as multicultural dialogues and consultations. It articulates the foundations for the paradigm of sustainable development and was conceived to guide not only states and governments, but also individuals and organizations involved in global environmental governance. In its preamble, its cosmopolitan approach is evident, embodied in the principles of universal responsibility and global interdependence.

Before embarking on his adventure in the Americas, what were Humboldt's actual intentions? To collect plants and animals, analyse electricity and magnetic elements in the atmosphere, and measure mountains? Yes, but behind all of this, Humboldt had a true purpose of "researching the interaction of all forces and the unity of Nature." (Wulf, 2016).



Humboldt wrote in his diary that everything is in interaction, interconnected: "alles ist in Wechselwirkung!" (Wulf, 2016). For him, going out into the fields and observing the vegetation, animals in their habitats, the landscape, the blue sky, the colour of water, initiating measurements, temperature, atmospheric pressure – all was a part of an impressive unity. No one had connected all these things together before! Therefore, every piece of information was potentially useful and part of the whole picture (Wulf, 2016 cit. 7, p. 66). This is reflected in the Earth Charter, in the affirmation that "all beings are interconnected and that each form of life has value," as well as the need for "a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility" (Earth Charter Commission, 2000).

Final Reflections

As evidenced above, Alexander von Humboldt was the one who sought evidence for Immanuel Kant's idea of the interconnection of all nature and its relationship with humanity (Wulf, 2016). He sought and found evidence that increasingly justifies the need to develop transnational rules notably in the field of international environmental law, for the protection of common goods (the commons), as they are found in nature: water, air, soil, forests and biodiversity. These elements and our requirements from it, unite human beings across nations and cultures.

In this regard, the Earth Charter, from a Humboldtian perspective of total interconnectedness, suggests, as

highlighted by Febres, a particular vision and a model of sustainable development in which the economic sphere is considered part of the social sphere, and both are contained within the biosphere. Understanding the integrity of the environment as a prerequisite that conditions the other objectives, it makes a call for the need to "find ways to harmonize diversity with unity." (Earth Charter, 2000). Therefore, the worldview articulated in the Earth Charter bears undeniable similarities to the ideas of Humboldt. Such similarities can be found in his work "Cosmos" where he elaborates on "the interrelation of all that exists, the unity in diversity!" (Puig, 2015 and Gómez Carder, 2019) The global unity Humboldt perceived is the most important premise that underpins the Earth Charter. This ever-increasing awareness of this interconnection and interdependence of all life on Earth, clearly articulated by Humboldt and in the Earth Charter, makes the cosmopolitan vision inevitable. These findings serve as a guide and basis to move forward on the path towards global environmental governance and also a global constitution.

*Note: This article is an extract and adaptation of my 2021 Dissertation "Alexander von Humboldt, A Carta da Terra e o Pacto Ecologico Europeu" (Alexander von Humboldt, The Earth Charter and The European Ecological) to obtain my Master's Degree in Law, with specialization in International and European Law, New School of Law, Portugal. Tutor: Dra. Soraya Nour Skell, Professora de Direito da Universidade Nova de Lisboa and reader: Rose Marie Inojosa



[1] The Global Pact for the Environment is an initiative and a “draft international treaty, which aims to recognize a new generation of fundamental rights and duties related to the protection of the environment, and in particular, the right to a healthy environment.” (<https://globalpactenvironment.org/en/>)

[2] A recent exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Art titled *Alexander von Humboldt and United States: Art, Nature, and Culture*, organized by Eleanor Jones Harvey, senior curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, considered how deeply intertwined the ideas of Humboldt were with America's emerging identity, based on an appreciation of the landscape.

[3] Everything is connected!

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