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**THE DIPLOMACY OF DOING GOOD:
ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT THE PATRON¹**

Gaius Maecenas, a wealthy Roman knight during the era of the Emperor Augustus, could hardly have imagined that it would take more than one and a half millennia before he found a truly worthy successor in Alexander von Humboldt. When Maecenas died in 8 B.C. his path to immortality was assured. After all, he had set an example of selflessness, and generously helped a number of poets. His name thus went on to become synonymous with the diplomacy of doing good ...

Not so Alexander von Humboldt, who is hardly known to posterity as a successor to Maecenas at all even though he was a unique master of the diplomacy of doing good and practised it in exemplary fashion for nearly a century. Due to his fame as a scientific discoverer of Latin America and as the last European universal genius it has been forgotten that he could easily have claimed the honorary title of a genius of patronage, too. Indeed, he well outstripped Maecenas in terms of charitable works: the number of those who directly or indirectly received sponsorship and help from him runs into the hundreds. And the beneficiaries were by no means only poets. As a universal genius Humboldt acted universally, too, and kept an eye on all the needy: artists, architects, mathematicians, physicists, chemists, pharmacists, discoverers, explorers, and composers, to mention but a few.

Above all, he repeatedly opened up opportunities for talented young people. In some cases, opportunities for greatness, as shown by Carl Friedrich Gauß and Justus von Liebig. Or the penniless French physician and botanist, Aimé Bonpland, who subsequently accompanied Humboldt to the American Tropics. Later, Humboldt even managed to arrange a lifelong state pension for him. Or the young Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, whom he commissioned to compose a cantata for him in 1824, to be performed in honour of the Society of Physicians and Naturalists which was meeting under Humboldt's chairmanship in Berlin. It was the unjustly forgotten "Humboldt-Cantata" which now, in 2003, will enjoy its audible resurrection in Berlin to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

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It was patronage which acted across borders and disciplines; it was cosmopolitan and, at the same time, fed by the concept of “fraternité” which Humboldt celebrated in Paris in 1791 – at a time when the ideas of the French Revolution were still uncorrupted. And it was patronage that started young: as early as 1793, immediately after taking up a post with the mining authorities in the *Fichtelgebirge*, Humboldt unceremoniously – and without asking the Minister in charge – set up a “Free Mining School” at his own expense to encourage this simple “working human class”. And it did not disappear as he got older either, this virtue of doing good. Even when he lost his huge fortune and was as poor as a church mouse, he continued to be “Europe’s secret Minister of Culture” by not hesitating to get into debt himself in order to help others.

Amongst the major lasting consequences of this diplomacy of doing good, however, are especially the networks of knowledge and cross-border scientific dialogue it instigated and sponsored. Since its foundation in 1860 and yet more so since its re-foundation, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation has seen itself as the champion and keeper of its eponym’s tradition of patronage because it is convinced that the great Humboldt virtue of sponsoring young academic talent demands to be emulated. Thus, it is surely not a forlorn hope to think that the 50th anniversary of the Foundation might prompt donations, be an opportunity to give, in the spirit of the words written by Du Bois-Reymond to his colleague Ludwig on 26 June 1849 from Berlin, “Every diligent scholar ... is Humboldt’s son, we are all his family”.

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