

# *The Abolitionist Views of Alexander Von Humboldt and the Solutions He Envisioned to End Slavery of the New Born United States of America*

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**Abstract:** The present research systematically reviews academic works, diaries and letters of Humboldt himself and academic works and journal articles on him, and comes to conclusions as follows: 1) Though mistaken as "champion of slavery" throughout his life, Humboldt was an indeed an uncompromising abolitionist who never stopped condemning slavery. 2) The education he received in his early youth and the miserable life he witnessed during his Latin America exploration forged his abolitionist views. 3) Humboldt envisioned a possible solution to end slavery in the new born United States of America but failed to get it accepted by the then US government.

## 1. Introduction

Post-colonialism, the school of thought which gained its importance in the academic circle in the early 1970s, believes that the industrial countries' colonial-style practices of seeking to exploit natural resources of developing countries and to oppress their people is inhumane and thus, should be discarded. The theoretical basis of this school of thought was constructed out of the respect for concepts like "Connectedness" and "Cultural Diversity". However, these terminologies were not the invention of the post-colonialists but have their roots in Alexander von Humboldt's critique of colonialism and slavery system in his series of writings during and after his epic scientific expeditions to Spanish colonies in the Americas from 1799 to 1804, and the newly independent United States of America 200 years ago. Humboldt(1769-1859), the Prussian born observant scientific traveler, was one of the founders of modern physical geography whose meticulous measurements and discoveries in geography, geology, zoology, botany, climatology, meteorology, and magnetism, etc. helped shape our understanding of the natural world of this planet. Humboldt was also a humanitarian Scholar who "*questioned the heritage of Spanish colonial rule, and spoke out against slavery in the United States*"<sup>[1]</sup> while conducting his five-year-long scientific explorations in the Americas. Humboldt's scientific observations and the critical insights of anti-colonialism and abolitionism influenced subsequent discussions on colonialism, governance, and abolitionist movement in the newly independent United States of America.

Although Humboldt, the Scientific discoverer of the New World<sup>[2]</sup>, is still a household name in Latin America and Europe, he is almost forgotten outside of academia in other parts of the world. The heat of Humboldtian Science which flourished in those two decades around the new millennium has also subsided in recent years and the publication of new academic works on him is on the decline: no biography of him has been published since the 1970s, and almost none of his works has been reprinted these years. Therefore, as direct or indirect beneficiaries of his political ideals as well as his groundbreaking scientific concepts, we should recall Humboldt out of oblivion and reclaim him as the “*champion of the oppressed*”<sup>[3]</sup> and “*one of those wonders of the world*”<sup>[4]</sup>. However, a close look into the publication of academic papers suggests that most of the recent journal articles on Humboldt have wrestled with his Humboldtian scientific travel Narrative<sup>[5]</sup> and his Latin American expedition<sup>[6]</sup>, few have explored his scientific activities<sup>[7]</sup>, discoveries<sup>[8]</sup> and their references for practitioners of modern science today<sup>[9]</sup>, even fewer have probed into his Environmental Protection Theory<sup>[10]</sup> which is also an integral part of Humboldt’s thoughts, shedding lights on natural resource preservation today. Only one<sup>[11]</sup> of the journal articles has touched upon his anti-slavery view when discussing his anti-colonial and anti-racist thought and his expeditions to Latin America and other parts of the world. Though these previous researches have contributed much from different perspectives to revive the Humboldtian Science and have explored new areas for its development, they have failed to examine his abolitionist thought which is a non-negligible part of Humboldt’s humanistic thought and one basic guiding principle of his scientific expeditions. Therefore, based on the academic works, diaries and letters of Humboldt himself, and the books, newspaper reports and academic papers on him, the present research explores, for the very first time, Humboldt’s abolitionist views which not only exerted important influences on Latin American Independence Movement, but also played a positive role in American abolitionist movement. And this theme of the present research is discussed in this paper from three aspects: His attitude against slavery, the way his abolitionist views came into being and the solution he envisioned to end slavery in the new born United States of America.

## 2. Humboldt’s Attitude against Slavery

As a humanistic scientific explorer who had created the groundbreaking scientific concept of “connectedness”, emphasizing for the very first time that “*the natural world was deeply connected to the political and moral history of human kind*”<sup>[12]</sup>, Humboldt highlighted disastrous environmental consequences of colonialism in his works on the European colonized Americas and criticized the colonizers’ barbarous enslavement and cruel exploitation of the indigenous Indians and African blacks even before the first time he set foot on the land of the new born United States of America. Despite this, his attitude against slavery had remained a disputable issue. Throughout his life and for a long time after his death. Even today, there are still people who, directly or indirectly influenced by the distorted English “translation” of Humboldt’s criticism of slavery in his *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, have stubbornly portrayed him as a defender of slavery in their writings. Therefore, it is necessary to clear his name as “*a champion of the oppressed*”<sup>[13]</sup> at the beginning part of this paper first to rectify the unfair misunderstanding of his attitude against slavery.

It is true that Humboldt set out to the New World-Spanish colonized Latin America by the grace of the Spanish King, Carlos IV. It is still true that he sailed off from the Spanish port of La Coruña on a corvette named after one of the notorious conquistador, Pizarro.<sup>[14]</sup> It is also true that the Crown, who had not only granted a permission for Humboldt to visit all his American “possessions”, but also offered him a patronage, “*was in a sense hoping to manipulate Humboldt, to use his discoveries to tighten its financial and political stranglehold in the New World.*”<sup>[15]</sup> But a systemic

reading of his works about his epic American expedition proves that it can not be even clearer that Humboldt felt “no obligation to support the Spanish kingdom’s colonial ruling in the Americas though he had concealed his abolitionist views and had not hesitated to accept the Crown’s patronage when applying for the royal passport. And once plunged into the politics of racial difference and colonial practices the moment he went ashore at Latin America, Humboldt would not hesitate to launch a series of explicit attacks on the Colonial system and reprehensible slavery practices of the slave-holding colonizers, regardless of how disappointed and embarrassing the Spanish King would probably be after hearing or seeing his records and disclosures in the manuscript which would be published within less than 20 years. His bold exposure of the colonizers’ immoral colonial practices, Spain’s brutal slave system, the Creole slaveholders’ violence against the aborigines and especially the miserable living conditions of the smuggled African blacks were even all included in his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, which he presented to the Spanish King, Carlos IV, in 1808 as a report about the Spanish north American colony (now Mexico) in gratitude for his patron’s having granted him access to everything he had wanted to see in Spain’s vast American holdings.<sup>[16]</sup>

Humboldt was a humanitarian. In his regard, “*Slavery, being an absolute moral evil, must be absolutely ended. It is not, that is, a natural feature of civilization but a historical development, with its roots in the European conquest and in the European colonial system*”.<sup>[17]</sup> Humboldt pointed in the first volume of his *Cosmos* that it was Aristotle that had established the “cheerless doctrine of the unequal rights of men to freedom”. And from Aristotle’s time on, human civilization had advanced without respect for the right of freedom for all. On closing the first volume of *Cosmos*, Humboldt expressed clearly and loudly his view of equality of the human species on which his view of abolitionism based: “Whilst we maintain the unity of the human species, we at the same time repel the depressing assumption of superior and inferior races of men. There are nations more susceptible of cultivation, more highly civilized, more ennobled by mental cultivation than others—but none in themselves nobler than others. All are in like degree designed for freedom.” Freedom had always been all Humboldt wanted the slaves to have throughout his life. Even in 1858, the year before his death, Humboldt was still haunted by the recollections of “*the sufferings of our colored fellowmen, who, according to my political views, are entitled to the enjoyment of the same freedom with ourselves.*”<sup>[18]</sup> His notion of “all races were equally human and equally capable of what his society considered civilization” was inherited by Franz Boas, the father of Modern Anthropology in the United States, and developed into his famous Cultural Relativism Theory.

### 3. The Way Humboldt’s Abolitionist Views Came into Being

Humboldt’s abolitionist views came into being with time and with reasons, among which, his early education and the miserable life of the black slaves and the enslaved aborigines he encountered during his Latin American expedition had their leading parts in the evolution of his abolitionist views from his childhood longing for freedom and equality.

#### 3.1. Education that Germinated Humboldt’s Abolitionist Views

Although Humboldt was said to be the revolutionary scientific traveller “standing on the Old World with his left leg and on the New World with his right leg”, his view on the abolition of slavery was not germinated in the New World—the Spanish colonized Americas, but in the “liberal Jewish intellectual circles” of Berlin where he was arranged an elite education and in the lecture halls of Frankfurt, Göttingen and Hamburg where he received his academic education.

Alexander von Humboldt was born on 14 September, 1769, the same year as Napoleon Bonaparte, to wealthy aristocratic parents who spent their winters in Berlin and their summers in a

small castle at Tegel about 10 miles north-west of the city. Born into this intellectually connected family whose name was held high in regard in the principality of Prussia, Young Alexander von Humboldt, together with his elder brother, Wilhelm von Humboldt, was granted an elite education and even privileged to have the future king, Friedrich Wilhelm III, as his godfather. Hardly had Alexander reached the age of nine, his beloved father who had always been charming and affectionate towards the boys died suddenly of illness. Though this domestic calamity disheartened his mother who became a rich widow for the second time, nothing changed in the way she educated her sons. As always, this formal, rigid and emotionally cold woman who seldom cared much about her sons' need for maternal love and familial intimacy, hired a series of enlightenment thinkers like J. H. Campe, the German translator of *Robinson Crusoe*, botanist K. L. Willdenow, physicist M. Herz and others who were the followers of Rousseau's educational philosophy like them, to provide the boys with the best education available in the then Prussia right at home. And this string of enlightenment thinkers were the very ones who had planted the seeds of views on liberty, equality, tolerance of "otherness" and "connectedness" of human beings and natural forces in Alexander while lecturing him on classic aristocratic learning course. With maternal warmth he had longed for so desperately never satisfied, and independent and liberal thinking gradually and fully inspired by these tutors, Alexander (henceforth simply referred to as Humboldt), from a very young age, enjoyed being outdoors, collecting insects, observing plants and minerals in and around the vibrant and interesting courtyard of his father's villa, Tegel's private residence, and hoping one day he could be far away from this landlocked country "which has no direct communication with either the East or the West Indies", and travel into "distant regions little known to Europeans."

Humboldt was raised at a changing time characterized by increasing globalization via colonization, with European colonial powers, headed by England, Spain and Portugal, expanding their holdings to tropical countries in Asia, Africa and Americas. Fittingly, this particular period also witnessed great scientific discoveries, technological breakthroughs and epic explorations. New scientific inventions made the industrial revolution possible in Europe, which in turn gave an impetus to technological innovations that affected various aspects of life all over the world. Newton's discovery of mechanical laws underlying physical phenomena, the invention of telescopes and microscopes, sextant, barometers, compasses, thermometers and hygrometers among many others which Humboldt's earliest youth had seen, were facilitating scientists' revealing of the laws that govern the natural world and would be of great importance in his exploration of the Spanish Americas when the time came. Accordingly, this period had also witnessed great changes in the world political arena. Slave-holding colonizers declared their independence from their mother country-England and the founding of the United States of America in 1776, the year just before Humboldt reached the age of seven. And in 1789 when he was hardly twenty, Humboldt saw the fire of the French Revolution started burning. As to Prussia, although still remained a principality of Germany, the yet to be nation at that time still under the umbrella of the Holy Roman Empire, it was fighting against Austria and other principalities for dominance and territories within what is now German.

Living through the age of Enlightenment and coming of age before the dawn of Romanticism made Humboldt "a child of the Enlightenment" who yearned to launch explorations and adventures in distant regions, especially the tropic countries in South America where he could possibly see the palms and other tropical plants in their natural environments. Discoveries of Benjamin Franklin and Lavoisier, invention of James Watt and books of Captain Cook and others about their circumnavigations enhanced his innate curiosity in nature study and fueled his desire for freedom and exploration in the tropics. However, being totally dependent on his emotionally distant mother for financial support, Humboldt could not pursue his heart's desire as he wanted. In compliance with his mother's wish for him to enter the civil services of the Prussian court, Humboldt enrolled

in the University of Göttingen to study textile manufacturing and finance. But rather than study the courses that he was supposed to study in this university, Humboldt, the boy fed up with the atmosphere of repression imposed by his mother back at home for the past two decades, chose to attend the scientific lectures such as “botany, literature, archaeology, electricity, mineralogy and the natural sciences”, especially those in geology, that interested him to a great deal.

It was in Göttingen that Humboldt studied with Johann F. Blumenbach(1752-1840), the well-established scholar in anatomy, physiology and anthropology. Although Blumenbach is mistakenly regarded as the one who proposed the white-centrism and frequently demonized for identifying five races, with the white race as the original form from which the other four had “degenerated”, he firmly believed and ardently defended the view that every race had the capacity for intellectual and moral improvement. And in order to prove the validity of his view, he showed every visitor his collection of books written by African Negroes who, in the eyes of the champions of white supremacy, were all “savage”, to show that these so called primitive and inferior people were actually the most distinguished with their admirable capacity for “scientific culture.” This anti-racist view of Blumenbach deeply influenced Humboldt who attended every lecture of his on anthropology and greatly fueled the student’s view on liberty and freedom which had already been planted in him by the enlightenment thinkers back in Berlin.

Like Blumenbach, Humboldt believed that only the society endowed with freedom can function well. Therefore, in 1792, after a brief period of study in the Freiburg School of Mining where he had been exposed to the renowned geologist J. Werner’s latest theories in mineralogy and geology, Humboldt was appointed by the Prussian government an Inspector of Mines in the Upper Franconia region of the Kingdom of Prussia as his mother’s wish. This job enabled him to travel across the vast domains of Prussia, collecting data concerning minerals, rocks and flora growing in various mining areas. Driven by his belief of liberty and freedom as well as his concern for the mine laborers who were usually slaves “dragged in chains” from Africa, Humboldt established the first training school in Europe for miners. As a reward for this unprecedented interest granted upon them, the slave miners broke all previous records of productivity.

Although Humboldt was nourished with the views of Enlightenment thinkers and thus, can be said to be “a product of the Enlightenment” or “a child of Enlightenment”, one fact that can not be denied is that he was receptive to romantic influences at the same time since he had come of age shortly before the dawn of Romanticism, and gained friendship and partnership of the famous German poet Goethe and other romantic writers. Besides, Humboldt was also a devoted follower of Adam Smith whose philosophy of plutonomy roused his deeply rooted “love of political freedom and his hatred of slavery” and thus, established in him a determination to be a liberal and a resolute abolitionist of slavery.

### **3.2. Sufferings of the Enslaved Seen and Heard on the Scientific Exploration through “Spanish Americas” Forged Humboldt’s Abolitionist Views**

As discussed above, Humboldt’s view on slavery was germinated by the education he had received since his earliest youth, among Enlightenment thinkers of Berlin and Göttingen, and also under the direct or indirect influence of eminent figures like Goethe, Schiller, James Cook and Louis Antoine de Bougainville through their friendships or writings. However, it did not even begin to come into a clear shape until he launched his epic scientific expedition to the ‘Spanish Americas’, because it was what he saw and heard during his explorations to those slave-holding Spanish colonies that matured and forged his anti-slavery thought and made him an ardent abolitionist.

The death of his mother at the end of 1796 made Humboldt a rich man who could pursue his life dream without any emotional or financial constraints. Therefore, Humboldt quit his job as a mining

inspector appointed by the Prussian government the point he graduated from a mining school at the age of 25 and set off on a four-month exploration across Europe with George Forster, the man who accompanied Captain James Cook on his second expedition to the Pacific.” Then, he purchased compasses, telescopes, Thermometers, Hygrometers and more than 40 other most advanced scientific exploratory instruments with the substantial inheritance that his mother had left him and set off with his companion Aimé Bonpland, a french naturalist who had “greatly distinguished himself by his numerous discoveries in botany” at the time when they met in Paris, to the Spanish kingdom to apply for the king’s permission to make “the scientific discovery of the New World.” 41 days later, With the royal passport in hand, he and his team landed on the coast of New Andalusia(today part of Venezuela) which had long become a colony of Spain together with many other places after the age of Great Navigation.

Though in essence, this best-known journey of Humboldt’s was a scientific exploration, aimed at “studying different species and their characteristics—a subject that is still being pursued far too exclusively”and discovering “how nature’s forces act upon one another and how the geographic environment works on animals and plants.” But a systematic study of Humboldt’s letters, academic works and Diaries concerning this expedition suggests that Humboldt’s research interest in this New World was not only limited to the scientific exploration, but also in the “inhumanity of mass slavery in the context of the world economy.”The barbarism and slavery he saw and heard of everywhere along the way of this scientific journey left him no other choice, but to silently observe and note down in passages of his manuscript which would eventually come out in public as “some thirty volumes relating to the findings of this expedition” five years later when He and his companion Aim é Bonpland finished their American expeditions and returned safely back to Europe. A letter to his dear elder brother Wilhelm depicted the miserable living conditions of the aborigines who had been reduced to slave workers in mines and plantations as follows:

Outside of the town (Cumaná) live the copper-colored Indians of which the men are almost completely nude. The huts are made of bamboo covered with coco leaves. I went into one of the huts. The mother was sitting with her children, in place of chairs on branches of coral thrown up by the sea. Each of them had before them a coconut shell in place of a plate out of which they were eating some fish.

And this aforementioned fish was not fresh fish caught by the householder from any nearby river or sea, but the salted fish allotted by their masters to supplement for the small amount of pickled meat which was worth no more than 12 riyals, corn, and sweet potatoes that could hardly meet their basic need for survival. What saddened his heart even more and what hardened his determination to become “a life-long abolitionist” was the scenes happened everyday right under the window of his rented house in Cumaná the first city he and Bonpland lived in during their Latin American exploration: Every morning, young African slaves, aged no more than twenty, were forced by the slave wholesalers, to rub their black skin with coconut oil to render it gleam and glossy. Then they were paraded in rows, waiting to be sold to plantations or mines. Then Prospective buyers would shoulder their way through the captives and jerked open their mouths to judge their age and health from their teeth just like what horse buyers usually do to horses on sale in an animal market then, and sometimes these proud buyers would sear their newly purchased slaves with a red-hot branding iron to recognize them again at the first sight if they would escape one day. This treatment bestowed by the rapacious Creole colonizers who were supposedly Christian, on those black slaves who would “save other men the labour of sowing, tilling, and reaping” incited Humboldt’s fury so much that he could not help but question sorrowfully and rhetorically, “What are the duties of humanity, national honor, or the laws of their country, to men stimulated by the speculations of sordid interest?”

Besides that, Humboldt was exposed to other forms of barbarism and slavery during his stay in



Venezuela. His interactions with the Creole elites enabled him to know the miserable living conditions of slaves which interested him so much and dampened his heart no less after seeing with his own eyes, and at the same time, deepened his hatred of slavery and violence against slaves even more. A diary of Humboldt written on 22 February, 1800 depicted the Creole elites' celebration of a local carnival in the house of Fernando Peñalver Pellón, a slave Owner and Jacobin in Venezuela and the fury of Humboldt after hearing Peñalver's assumption of the so called 'White Republic':

The circle of Valencia (Where Peñalver's house was located) seems more cultivated than that of Caracas. Talk is more casual. Mr. Fernando Peñalver received the same education as his brother, also thin like a dog, but taller, and boasted himself as Adonis. Poor vanity! For the first few days is always about Renard, encyclopedia, human freedom..., then, to common humanity. The Portuguese Think that a White Republic should be established [...]; In the White Republic, even the free mulattoes should not have rights, slaves should kneel while serving their masters. They (the masters) should sell the sons of slaves... this is the result of the American Enlightenment! Throw away your Encyclopedia and Renard, you bastards!

In Humboldt's view, Slavery was absolute tyranny forced upon the maroon aborigines and the raided African blacks. Due to the personal intercourse with the Creole elites, Humboldt had the chance to witness the real living conditions of the slave laborers. His diary was filled with horrendous scenes of suffering of the slaves besides the miserable living conditions of them as discussed above: one plantation owner in Caracas tortured his slaves with needles, whereas another forced his slaves to eat their own excrement, not to mention the scars of whiplash on the backs of slaves and iron marks on their faces or arms wherever and whenever he turned his eyes to. Horrible stories concerning the extreme cruelty with which the slaves were treated even by Christian missionaries who had been supposed to be the one spreading Love and Saving Grace of God to all sufferers were also recorded in his diary:

An aboriginal slave boy's testicles were bitten off by his master, a missionary in his Mission Station, just because he had kissed a slave girl. This means that Indians who had been reduced to be free laborers were not treated any better than the black slaves smuggled from Africa.

In his *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, Humboldt recorded the shameful scenes of slave trading by his host Juan Luis de La Questa who had provided him with free accommodation purposely and access to witness the miserable living conditions of the enslaved unexpectedly, and slave-holding sucrose oligarchs like him in Cuba: There was a botanical garden near Campo de Marte, a place worthy of government attention. The existence of one thing, barracks, in that garden, was both outrageous and shocking! Slaves were miserably displayed in front of the barracks, waiting to be sold."

The "recollection of crimes produced by the fanaticism and insatiable avarice of the first conquerors "haunted Humboldt so much that he could not help but repeat his abolitionist view of "Slavery is no doubt the greatest evil that afflicts human nature", it had "no place in society" throughout his expedition in Spanish colonized America and the new born United States of America, and finally forged him into a resolute adversary of slavery who firmly believed that ' inaction in the face of slavery was simply a crime" so he must do something to end it. As to the possible ways to end the shameful slavery, Humboldt had his own thinking.

#### **4. Humboldt's Proposals to End Slavery in the United States**

Having designed a phased reformatory solution to gradually end slavery in Latin America, Humboldt turned his mind to the soon to be uprising abolitionist movement of the New born United States of America, the land he and his companion Aimé Bonpland explored once finished their four-year-long scientific exploration in Spanish colonized Americas. The antislavery movements in

the United States has increasingly become a hot topic and a central issue in American history and political research in the past century, but few seem to be aware of Humboldt's connection with this big event in American history. Although this large-scale mass movement demanding the complete abolition of slavery did not officially begin until the early 1930s, the idea of abolishing slavery of the United States of America was proposed by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin as early as the time even before the United States declared its independence in 1776 and had been fought for ever since, by people of humanitarian spirit. Humboldt was "the only major scientist during the nineteenth century who argued consistently, for six decades, that 'race' was not a biological category" and that "none of the human races were, in any meaningful sense, 'superior' or 'inferior' to any other" and therefore, everyone of them should be appreciated on its own term and by its own standard. Humboldt believed that "all are alike designed for freedom", race and slavery were not natural features of civilization, but of historical development, with their "roots in the European conquest and in the European colonial system." Therefore, it is fair to say that Humboldt was the major contributor of modern racial egalitarianism and hero of abolitionism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and his views on racial egalitarianism and abolitionism not only had an impact on modern anthropological conceptions of race and cultural diversity, but also played a positive role in the antislavery movement in the then newly independent United States.

Humboldt and Bonpland arrived in Philadelphia, the largest city in the then America, at the end of May 1804, nearly one month after their departure from the Spanish Latin America on April 29 that year. For fear of any possible offence, Humboldt wrote a long letter to the then American President, Jefferson, the day before their arrival, expressing his desire for an official meeting in Washington, D.C., the new capital of this free land where the amount of slave laborers were ironically soaring. Upon receiving Jefferson's invitation letter, Humboldt set out with his devoted companion, Bonpland, to Washington D.C. to pay his visit. They stayed in Washington for one week. During this one-week stay there, Humboldt had many pleasant conversations with Jefferson because these two shared many common scientific interests and concepts. Jefferson, like Humboldt, still maintained a strong interest in all sciences, including horticulture, mathematics, meteorology and geography", even when he had long been involved in politics. As a matter of fact, Jefferson was at the pinnacle of his political career: he had drafted the Declaration of Independence together with another two of the 14 founding fathers of the United States, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, and was already the "President of the United States, and by the end of the year he would win a landslide election, securing his second term" of the presidency.

Humboldt and Jefferson reached a common understanding on colonialism at the end of those conversations, thinking that colonialism could only bring destruction, both of natural resources like land, river, forest and soil, and of the oppressed laborers, the enslaved African blacks and the native people as well. Despite all those common scientific interests and shared political understanding on colonialism, divergence arose when the topic of slavery was mentioned in their conversations. Humboldt was a humanitarian, who believed "Slavery, being an absolute moral evil, must be absolutely ended" and "any form of slavery, even if present in the territories of the Native Americans, is objectionable." Humboldt argued that "colonialism and slavery were basically one and the same." Slavery had been brought, by the English colonizers, to their North American colonies to till their newly colonized farmland and to work in plantations and mines. Their appearance in what was then United States of America in the wake of enlightenment was simply out of the Europeans' thirst for land, rights and wealth. Knowing that America' slavery system was somewhat different from that of Spanish Americas: Slaves there were basically African blacks, and while the northern states had freed their black slaves, slave-holding plantation owners in the southern states were still committed to pursuing huge profit from sugar, coffee, cotton and tobacco production using large amount of slave labor. Jefferson's thought of making the newly independent



United States the center of world civilization puzzled him: “What a spectacle would that centre of civilization offer, where, in the sanctuary of liberty, we could attend a sale of Negroes after death [of their owners], and hear the sobbing of parents who are separated from their children!”

The association with Kings like Frederick William III of Prussia and Carlos IV of Spain, wealthy slave-traders like Juan Luis de La Questa and Gabriel Raimondo de Azcarat, and Creole slave-holding elites like Simón Bolívar, etc. and the personal witnesses of the real living conditions of those oppressed had taught Humboldt a hard-nosed realpolitik, making him believe that if not backed by the power of law and authority, enlightenment alone would not exert much effect on abolishing slavery. Based on this war-scarred political philosophy, Humboldt analyzed America’s problem of slavery in the way that principles which had been animating northern states would not solve the problem of slavery in the slave-holding southern states alone, nor would “time”, nor would the so called “civilization” represented by the sugar, cotton and tobacco they produced in their plantations, because time would only nourish “the courage of despair, and a desire of vengeance” of the enslaved, and “civilization” had been coexistent with slavery since Aristotle’s ancient Rome. This being considered, Humboldt proposed a possible solution to end slavery of this newly established independent country, a way of “community of actions and efforts” including directing actions of governments and of legislatures, the firm will of the local authorities and the “concurrence of wealthy and enlightened citizens” of the slave-holding regions.

As a slaveholder born into a slave-holding family himself, Jefferson’s livelihood had been “founded on slave labor”. Although he loathed colonization, Jefferson, as a beneficiary of slavery system, was not willing to abolish slavery all together. Although he had indeed claimed to abolish slavery as early as the time when America declared its independence in 1776, and had claimed to take the initiative to set 200 of his slaves who toiled on his plantations in Virginia free to set an influential example for slaveholders to follow, Jefferson chose to forget what he had promised publicly and explicitly once he had grasped the highest administrative power of this country in his hand as the President of the United States of America. Previously when visiting Germany as still an American Minister, Jefferson had thought of a plan to end slavery: to immigrate the hard-working German farmers, whom he believed to be “absolutely incorruptible by money”, and intermingle them with his slaves on his plantations. By this way, the slaves would still “remain his property, but their children would be free and ‘good citizens’ by having been brought up in the proximity of the German farmers”. This scheme, if had implemented well, would be a great step towards the successful abolition of slavery in America. However, to Humboldt’s disappointment, “The scheme was never implemented, and by the time Humboldt met him, Jefferson had abandoned all plans to free his slaves.” As a matter of fact, none of his 600 slaves would be set free even before his death in 1826, and it was not until several years later that the Abolitionist Movement of America began in earnest.

Although disappointed with the President’s attitude towards the emancipation of slaves, Humboldt did not quite dare to publicly criticize Jefferson himself considering his yet to be launched scientific exploration plan. Even so, he didn’t give up condemning slavery, which he deemed as the “the greatest evil” that needed to be abolished. Therefore, he explained to the architect William Thornton, a friend of Jefferson’s, his proposal of an economy without slave labor from the perspective of economic Anthropology by saying that “slavery was a ‘disgrace’, of course the abolition of slavery would reduce the nation’s cotton production, but public welfare could not be measured ‘according to the value of its exports’. Justice and freedom were more important than numbers and the wealth of a few.” From the reactions of Jefferson when he expressed his anti-slavery views in that one week stay in Washington D.C. and the slow progress of the American abolitionism the following several decades, Humboldt knew that the battle for freedom for all the oppressed was not faring well. This worried him constantly over the “fool’s road” the United States

of America' was travelling on. Humboldt's worries about the far too slow progress of the American abolitionism and the danger that was being simmered by the cruel maltreatment of the Whites in southern slave-holding states were well reflected in his 1845 letter to George Sumner, the brother of Massachusetts senator Charles S. Sumner, in which he gave his recipient some instructions to publish his travels: on the condition that you remain most faithful to the sentiments of Liberty, to which many of your countrymen seem to be growing indifferent, either from the influence of social life in Europe, or under the pretext of exaggerated fears of radicalism. I desire, also, in your work, by the side of a love for the Whites, some complaints at the ferocious legislation of the Slave States.

Although Humboldt's proposal to end slavery then and there was turned down politely and tactfully by Jefferson, and thus, he took his departure from the United State a few more weeks later with a dampened heart, his abolitionist views played a positive role in the full-scale American abolitionism which officially started in the early 1830s. Although he went back to Europe in 1808 and never set foot on American soil again since then, Humboldt "retained, on quitting America, the same horror of slavery which I had felt in Europe." and kept caring for the progress of the anti-slavery movement of the United States. Alexander von Humboldt, the Prussian scientific explorer and humanitarian abolitionist, died at the age of 90, in Berlin on 6 May, 1859. When the dispatch of Joseph Albert Wright, the United States ambassador to Prussia, arrived in America 13 days later, announcing that "The great, good and venerated Humboldt is no more", liberal thinkers, artists and scientists whose minds had been fed, quoting the scientist Louis Agassiz, "from the labors of Humboldt's brain", all grieved at the death of "the greatest man since the Deluge." At the same time, these people, together with many thousands of Americans who knew little of Humboldt's scientific contributions to widen the bounds of human knowledge but thought of him as one of "the age's great humanitarians", assembled to pay their respect to this "most remarkable" and most venerable man not only for his all-around services to science, but also for his lifelong effort to abolish slavery. Although Humboldt's life came to its natural end in 1859, his spirit of fighting for the oppressed lived on and encouraged the Abolitionist Movement of the United States of America which led to the liberation of the black slaves four years later when President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation took effect on 1 January , 1863.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper investigated the great Prussian natural scientist and a humanitarian scholar Alexander von Humboldt's abolitionist views and his effort to abolish slavery in the Americas. A systemic reading of his academic works, diaries and letters, and of those books, newspaper reports and academic papers about his well-known scientific expeditions to North and South Americas has revealed that Humboldt was a fierce critic of slavery. Although Humboldt had been mistakenly portrayed, throughout his life, as "the champion of slavery" by some Americans due to Thrasher's deliberately distorted English "translation" of his criticism of slavery in his *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, his fair name of "a champion of the oppressed" was finally regained after death when a faithful-to-the-original version of translation was published in 1928. Humboldt was an uncompromising abolitionist who never stopped condemning slavery in his manuscripts recorded during his scientific explorations to the slave-holding regions of the Americas. The seed of his abolitionist views was planted by the Enlightenment thinkers who tutored him in his early youth and nurtured by the associations with intellectuals like Blumenbach, Goethe and Schiller in his young adulthood. The epic expedition to Spanish Americas which presented him with unbearably cruel scenes of slave trading, and the miserable living conditions of the enslaved aboriginal Indians and the smuggled African blacks forged his abolitionist views and made him an ardent abolitionist. Fretted by slaveholders' insatiable avarice for wealth at the expense of the lives of slaves, and

grieved by the sufferings of the enslaved “colored fellowmen”, Humboldt not only envisioned a reformative solution to end slavery gradually in Spanish colonized Americas, but also tried to play a positive part in the Abolitionist movement of the new born United States of America. Doubtlessly, while Humboldt’s scientific discoveries made him a predominant intellectual of his time and “the most famous human being after Napoleon”, the self-crowned Emperor of France born the same year as Humboldt himself and whom Humboldt despised. As a white aristocrat who was born and educated in Europe, Humboldt’ abolitionist views made him an attacker of European colonialism and slavery, and thus, an antipathetic exception to the European colonial paradigm. Although he failed to witness the success of the American abolitionism in his lifetime, his abolitionist views exerted great influences on liberals and abolitionists all over the world and made him “a visionary, a thinker far ahead of his time” and the “second Columbus” of the New World who was hailed and is still being hailed by the admirers of liberty and equality worldwide.

This is the first comprehensive study into the anti-slavery view and activism of Alexander von Humboldt. Although it is possible that there are still important questions remain to be found out and clarified, the aforementioned research findings can serve as significant implications for a better understanding of the formation and influences of anti-slavery views of scientific travelers like Humboldt in the early post-colonial era. The main weakness of this study was the paucity of materials from journal articles and other forms of works written in German and French due to the difficulties of data collecting and the authors’ insufficient proficiency of those two languages. Therefore, it is recommended that further research be conducted in aspects as follows: a). collecting original manuscripts of Humboldt, and other relevant materials of him and about him written not only in English, but also in German, French and other possible languages to obtain a fuller understanding of the essence of Humboldt’s abolitionist views; b). exploring Humboldt’s anti-colonial thought as “for Humboldt, colonialism and slavery were basically one and the same”; and c). analyzing the relationship between his abolitionist views and his concepts of “connectedness”, because colonialism and slavery are “interwoven with man’s relationship to nature and the exploitation of natural resources.”

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