

ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT AND ARTICLE 9
OF THE *CONSTITUTION OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper proposes a reconstruction of the connection between the scientific observations of the Prussian scientist Alexander von Humboldt and Article 9 of the *Constitution of the Italian Republic*. This reconstruction is based on Humboldt's *Tableaux de la Nature* and his *Relation historique*. It will show how the ideas of the German naturalist Hugo Conwentz derived from Humboldt's works and will then consider the influence of Conwentz on Article 150 of the *Weimar Constitution*. Lastly, it will afterwards illustrate how Article 9 itself is based on Article 150 of the *Weimar Constitution* and how it was subject to changes before assuming its current, constitutional wording.

KEYWORDS: Alexander von Humboldt, Hugo Conwentz, natural monuments, Article 9, *Constitution of the Italian Republic*

Before attempting to reconstruct the connection between Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) and Article 9 of the *Constitution of the Italian Republic* (1947), one of the fundamental principles of the Italian State, I would like to explain briefly the project I and other interested scholars are currently working on.

The idea is to institute the composition of a framework which will draw attention to Humboldt's direct and indirect relations with Italian naturalists, scientists, geographers and politicians. I have written in the past about some of these contemporaries of Humboldt who knew him and who adopted his concept of nature without hesitation (Visconti, 1987 a, 1987 b, 1992, 2001, 2004, 2015; Di Bartolo & Visconti, 2018). They were natural scientists, mainly botanists dedicated to research in the field of Botanical Geography. This was a new discipline at the time and a result of the observations carried out by Humboldt during his travels in tropical America. In particular, one may recall Vincenzo Cesati (1806–1883), director of the Botanical Gardens of Naples from 1868 to 1883, and Filippo Parlatore (1816–1877), professor of Botany at the University of Florence and director of the Botanical Gardens of the Museum of Physics and Natural History of the same city from 1842 to 1877. Others are well-known for having themselves travelled in South America, following for the most part in Humboldt's footsteps: scientists such as Agostino Codazzi (1793–1859) who travelled in Central and South America from 1824 to 1859 and compiled an important work, the *Statistical Geography of Venezuela* (*Geografia statistica del Venezuela*, 1864), and Antonio Raimondi (1826–1890) who travelled throughout Peru and, as well as drawing numerous maps, produced a physical description of the country in his book *El Perú*, 1874–1879. While Raimondi's American explorations are well-known, his life before leaving Italy is not easy to study or reconstruct due to the scarcity of documentation recovered up to the present moment. In relation to Humboldt's many other contacts, I am gathering material from the archives of the scientific associations scattered throughout Italy to which Humboldt had been nominated honorary member, from among the manuscripts and publications of the times to

be found in libraries and also from private archives which until now have remained totally unexplored and are not readily accessible. I have realised that I have set myself an enormous task; that Humboldt's influence was and still is widespread and manifests itself where one would least expect it; that Humboldt himself was well-known, very well known in fact, not simply admired but also followed in the most diverse cultural circles; that research into his scientific influence reserves many surprises. And even that it will continue to reserve more surprises in the future as Humboldt's role as scientist is heightened and even more inspiring when it is studied through investigations into the perceptive potential of his followers.

Having said that, I will now move on to the subject of our meeting today: the connection between Humboldt and Article 9 of the *Constitution of the Italian Republic*. Initially unknown to me, this connection is a subject partially dealt with in the writings of Salvatore Settis on landscape. These writings focus essentially on the struggles for the preservation of Italy's natural and artistic heritage, on the risks of overbuilding and the constant link between landscape and democracy. Humboldt, along with other scientists, artists, art historians and politicians are referenced by Settis in order to defend the artistic, historic and natural heritage of Italy (Settis, 2012, 2013, 2017). All these figures were useful threads in weaving the fabric of what, as Settis himself recalls, was the backdrop for the task undertaken in 1947 by Concetto Marchesi of the Communist Party and Aldo Moro of the Christian Democrats who were charged with the drafting of what, after much passionate debate, was to become Article 9 of the *Constitution of the Italian Republic* in its current wording (Settis, 2017, pp. 11–13). All useful threads, as I have said, but none of them the direct object of Settis' attention since it was evident that his goal was the safeguarding of the natural landscape from the multiple assaults that can be witnessed on a daily basis.

Nonetheless, the reconstruction by Settis of the progression that led to the drafting of Article 9 was particularly interesting and prompted me to attempt a shift in perspective by placing Humboldt at the centre of the scene. What emerged and the insights thus gained led to a novel reading of passages in Humboldt's works through which it is also possible to understand how his ideas came to influence Article 9. It is necessary to bear in mind that the wording of Article 9, as expressed in the Constitution, is the outcome of an accumulated wealth of debate which had generated many different versions before validating the final version. As is well known, this reads: "The Republic shall promote the development of culture and scientific and technical research. It shall safeguard natural landscape and the historical and artistic heritage of the Nation." With its close association between natural landscape and heritage, the final version consolidates all the preceding versions.

This is not the place to consider all the different versions drafted for Article 9 (Leone et al., 2013, pp. 151–179). It will be enough to recall the initial version and from there retrace our steps back in time to arrive ultimately at Humboldt. The initial version reads: "The artistic, historic and natural monuments of the Nation constitute its national heritage and are under the protection of the State" (Leone et al., 2013, p. 152). It is the term "monuments", and more in particular "natural monuments", which are of interest here and the reasons for this will be understood presently. The first questions which might be asked are: Why was Concetto Marchesi familiar with the term "natural monuments"? Why did he introduce the term into the draft of Article 9?

In order to answer these questions, we must go back in time to the *Weimar Constitution* (1919), one of the three constitutions that the Italian Ministry for the Constituent sent to the Assembly as indispensable documents or, rather, potential models for the drafting of the *Italian Constitution*. Article 150 of the *Weimar Constitution* reads as follows: “Artistic, historical, and natural monuments as well as landscapes enjoy the protection and care of the state.” (Ziefer, 2010). It is evident that the initial version of the Italian text derives from the German text (Settis, 2012).

Within this frame of reference, we can take another step back in time, moving from the *Weimar Constitution* to understand how “natural monuments” became part of the objects that the State must safeguard. We will encounter the German natural scientist Hugo Conwentz (1855–1922) and his notion that “natural monuments” are no less important than “historical monuments” and “artistic monuments”. At the time of Conwentz the term “natural monument” was a new expression and not yet so well defined as the other two terms - “artistic monument” and “historical monument” - mentioned in Article 150 of the *Weimar Constitution*. This is therefore the moment to focus on the term “natural monuments”.

We will retrace our steps further by asking ourselves what Conwentz meant by “natural monument” and in order to answer this question we can refer directly to the work he dedicated specifically to this subject (Conwentz, 1904). We will find a variety of objects. Firstly, he makes a distinction between “historical monuments” and “artistic monuments” as the outcome of the human mind and hand, and “natural monuments”, which are the products of nature. However, in the course of his reflections, he is forced to abandon this apparently clear-cut distinction. Among “natural monuments” he places those objects which recall the situation of the planet in different geological eras, the remains of extinct animal and plant species, the artefacts of the time when humans first appeared on Earth, and objects that are traces of ancient upheavals. All are objects from the remote past which have a long history and in virtue of which have acquired the dignity of “monument”. And then again, among “natural landscapes”, he lists mountains, glaciers, landscapes with their specific flora which confer uniqueness to the natural landscape and create the diverse natural scenarios of the Earth. Finally, he makes the dividing line initially drawn between “artistic monuments” and “historical monuments” on the one hand and “natural monuments” on the other even less distinct. The concept of “natural monument” is extended to include parks and gardens, that is “monuments” that are the consequence of a combination of the efforts of humans and the work of nature. As a result, the meaning which Conwentz conveys through the term “natural monument” is vast and difficult to accommodate. It includes many objects with diverse meanings and, despite Conwentz’s efforts to clarify the term, it remains partially undefined. The reason for this is that Conwentz was the first to attempt a definition of “natural monument” and also because while attempting to define it, he was also striving to safeguard “natural monuments”, declaring the State responsible for their preservation and protection on a par with “artistic monuments” and “historical monuments”. Hence the inclusion of “natural monuments” in Article 150 of the *Weimar Constitution*.

At this point, it seems logical to ask where the term “natural monument” has its origins since its meaning, as was mentioned above, was only partially defined when Conwentz was writing.

Consequently, we will step further back in time to arrive at Humboldt. He was the first to use, and may even have invented, the term “natural monument” but he does not attribute it only one meaning. At least three meanings emerge from his works. We will now attempt to determine how the term came to be formulated, in which contexts and with which distinct meanings.

The first time the term appears it is simply “monument”, without the modifying adjective “natural”. In 1808, in Volume II of the *Tableaux de la nature*, he writes: “A tropical forest of *Hymenaeas* and *Caesalpinieae* may perhaps present to us a monument of more than a thousand years’ standing” (Humboldt, 1808, Vol. II, p. 32. English Translation: Humboldt, 1848, Vol. II, p. 17).

A few pages later in the same volume of the *Tableaux*, the simple “monument” becomes an “organic monument” when he refers to the baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) whose trunk, Humboldt wrote, “with a very moderate elevation, has a diameter of 32 English feet, and is probably the largest and most ancient organic monument on our planet” (Humboldt 1808, Vol. II, p. 44. English Translation: Humboldt, 1848, vol. II, p. 22). The concept of ancientness and remote past is associated first with the concept of “monument” and then with that of “organic monument”, with the tropical forest’s one thousand years of age and the baobab tree as the planet’s most ancient organic monument.

The term “natural monument” appears for the first time in 1819 in various passages in Volume II of the *Relation historique* in which Humboldt writes: “The more peaceful world which we inhabit has then succeeded to a world of tumult. The bones of mastodons and American elephants are found dispersed on the table lands of the Andes. The megatherium inhabited the plains of Uruguay. On digging deep into the ground, in the high valleys, where neither palm-trees nor arborescent ferns can grow, strata of coal are discovered, that still show vestiges of gigantic monocotyledonous plants. There was a remote period then, in which the classes of plants were otherwise distributed, when the animals were larger, and the rivers broader and of greater depth. There end those records [In the original French text: monuments] of nature, that it is in our power to consult” (Humboldt, 1814-1825, Vol. II, pp. 281-282. English Translation: Humboldt, 1852-1853, Vol. II, pp. 225-226). As previously in the *Tableaux*, the idea of a remote era is repeated – and accordingly a “natural monument” of historical character. It is this concept of ancientness that is retrieved by Cowentz.

But a “natural monument” is not such only for its capacity to evoke long forgotten worlds or to assist in their understanding, which for the German scientist was primarily scientific understanding. It can also have an aesthetic value and can, as Humboldt defines it, be “extremely picturesque”. Consequently, for the feelings it arouses, a “natural monument” is similar to an artistic monument. In his *Relation historique*, Humboldt writes: “Between this Caño [Aujacoa] and the Rio Paruasi or Paruati, the country becomes more and more woody. A solitary rock, of extremely picturesque aspect, rises in the midst of a forest of palms, not far from the Orinoco. It is a pillar of granite, a prismatic mass, the bare and steep sides of which attain nearly two hundred feet in height. Its point, which overtops the highest trees of the forest, is terminated by a shelf of rock with horizontal and smooth surface. Other trees crown this summit [...]. This monument of nature, in its simple grandeur recalls to the mind the Cyclopean remains of antiquity. Its strongly-marked outlines, and the group of trees and shrubs by which it is crowned, stand out from the

azure of the sky. It seems a forest rising above a forest” (Humboldt, 1814–1825, Vol. II, p. 273. English Translation: Humboldt, 1852–1853, vol. II, p. 218).

And again, a “natural monument” can embrace a third meaning: a sentimental value that is connected to the local population and their perceptions. It can be an object in which the population mirrors and identifies, to the point of attributing it the value of “artistic monument”. In this regard, Humboldt again wrote in 1819 that between San Mateo and Turmero in Venezuela there is “one single tree, the famous *Zamang del Guayre*, known throughout the province for the enormous extent of its branches which form a hemispheric head of 576 feet in circumference. The *Zamang* is a fine species of mimosa, and its tortuous branches are divided by bifurcation. Its delicate and tender foliage was agreeably relieved on the azure of the sky [...] Its real beauty consists in the form of its head. The branches extend like an immense umbrella, and bend towards the ground, from which they remain at a uniform distance of 12 or 15 feet. The circumference of this head is so regular ... One side of the tree was entirely stripped of its foliage, owing to the drought, but on the other side there remained both leaves and flowers. [...] The inhabitants of these villages, but particularly the Indians, hold in veneration the *Zamang del Guayre*; which the first conquerors found almost in the same state in which it now remains. [...] There is something solemn and majestic in the aspect of aged trees and the violation of these monuments of nature is severely punished in countries destitute of monuments of art” (Humboldt, 1814–1825, Vol. II, pp. 58-59. English Translation: vol. I, pp. 500-501).

And here, on this possible interchange in meaning between “artistic monument”, “historical monument” and “natural monument” and the various perspectives that this interchange might reveal, the journey back in time which I have attempted to trace ends. Hopefully, some understanding has been reached as to one of the many aspects of Humboldt’s vision of nature which will encourage us to discover other narratives - narratives that have yet to be written.

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