

THE RECEPTION OF HUMBOLDT'S WORK
IN ITALIAN CATHOLIC CIRCLES OF THE 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Through the analysis of some Italian Catholic reviews of the nineteenth century the reception of Humboldt's work will be highlighted in a specific environment - the Catholic one - where the opinion on the importance of his work has changed over time. Especially the case of the magazine «Civiltà Cattolica» will be analyzed. Indeed, the magazine changed its opinion on the German scientist after the publication of the Columbus biography by Count Roselly de Lours, contrasting the authority of Humboldt's *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Continent*. At the end, a short list of "priest-scientists" who referred directly to Humboldt and were inspired by his work will be presented.

KEYWORDS: Humboldt, Italy, Catholic circles, Catholic reviews, 19th century

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this contribution is a small part of a wider ongoing research about the reception of Humboldt's work in Italy which will see its publication online in the coming months through a dedicated website.¹ The reception of Humboldt's works in the Italian Catholic circles of the nineteenth century is a specific aspect, a particular point of view, to deal in an original way with the general subject of Humboldt's fortune in the Italian peninsula. We have not chosen casually the Catholic circles environments, where the critical ferment, at different times, has taken on different opinions towards Humboldt. Catholic circles reviewed Humboldt's work fairly early, through some media, such as specialist magazines; moreover, Catholic scientists and naturalists, often coming from religious orders, or professional ecclesiastics, have read and absorbed German research, "using" Humboldt and producing, during the nineteenth century, studies that explicitly call back to the discoveries of the Berlin scientist; still others had close friendships and collaborative relationships on specific issues with him. We must say that Italian critical literature on Humboldt does not include complete studies on the reception of the scientist's work in the peninsula. Consequently, a study of Catholic circles can be considered an original aspect of the many still to be studied about Humboldt reception.²

Talking about Italian "Catholic circles" of the nineteenth century, I refer to those places where the clergy and religious education was available: then primarily the episcopal seminaries for secular priests, then male institutes of consecrated life, such as monasteries and convents,

¹ The project is called "Humboldt Italian Center" and It consists in a website where all the Italian authors cited by Humboldt and all the Italian scientists and naturalists who have read, studied and analyzed the work of the German scientist will be collected. The project arises from a long-term collaboration with Professor Agnese Visconti.

² About the relationships between Humboldt and Italian scientists has been published only one specific study on phytogeography: Rodolico, 1969. Recently It has been published a study by Di Bartolo & Visconti, 2019.

often assisted by prestigious libraries. Among the latter we must remember some particular congregations which were receptive to the instances coming from the world of science: the Società di Gesù or Jesuits - historically one of the most attentive - together with other societies of apostolic life such as the Barnabits (regular clerics of San Paolo) or the Scolopi of Scuole Pie (regular clerics poor of the Mother of God) or the Theatins (regular Theatine clerics). Some of these Congregations or societies of apostolic life - the Società di Gesù precisely - published important magazines, such as the periodical «Civiltà Cattolica», which assumed during the nineteenth century the role of an accredited media in the Catholic field, especially to review authors of contemporary literature and science (Dante, 1990).

It is not surprising, for those who have gained some experience in scientific history research or in the individual sectors to which they belong, to find throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries names of scientists from ecclesiastical backgrounds: priests, canons, bishops or cardinals belonging to the clergy diocesan (that is, who had studied in diocesan seminaries) or religious from institutes of consecrated life like monks, abbots, simple friars (Pizzamiglio, 2015). It is possible to make a simple list of names to show how in certain mature Catholic circles there has never been a starting prejudice for “frontier” research or towards reading new authors who presented cutting-edge scientific hypotheses and that they were sometimes close to excommunication for positions discordant with accepted Catholic dogmas or for theological interpretations outside the recognized tradition. On the contrary, in certain cultural environments where the action of ecclesiastical courts (such as the Sant’Uffizio) was more difficult, the works of those scientists whose books had been placed on the *Index* circulated and were read easily (Fasanella, 2002).

The aim of the study is therefore to illustrate how and why the opinion on Humboldt has changed over time within a certain environment, and even to offer a brief overview of those “scientist priests” who followed in the footsteps of the German.

Humboldt in Italian Catholic Journals

Starting from the 1830s, the cultural production of Catholic-liberal inspiration was strengthened. Especially in the urban areas of Po and Tuscan Italy, a generation of churchmen, who no longer had much in common with the eighteenth-century clergy, emerged. Aware of what was happening in various areas of knowledge, Catholics also began to make investment in communication.

After this assumption I would like to quickly review those nineteenth-century magazines of great prestige and diffusion of the Italian Catholic sphere, in which the various contributors or editors responsible for editorial articles demonstrate that they have known or read the scientific work by Humboldt. The magazines involved in this quick review are: «Memorie di religione, di morale e di letteratura» (founded in Modena in 1822), «Guida dell’educatore» (founded in 1836), «L’Araldo Cattolico» (founded in Lucca in 1844), «Civiltà Cattolica» (founded in 1850 during the exile of pope Pio IX to Gaeta).³ I will focus mainly on the case of the most prestigious nineteenth-century magazine, «Civiltà Cattolica», highlighting the ambivalent attitude held by this religious newspaper to explain the reason for a sudden “change of views”, caused by

³ I used the indexes of these periodicals to find out when and where Humboldt is referred to and how.

the Humboldt's publication that was considered opposite to the biography of Cristoforo Colombo published by Count Roselly de Lorgues.

In the first magazine taken into consideration, the «Guida dell'educatore» magazine, born in 1836 and edited by another illustrious Genoese citizen, Raffaello Lambruschini,⁴ we find the first reference (year IV, 1839). The presence of Humboldt name should not surprise because Lambruschini is the same intellectual who collaborated with Gian Pietro Vieusseux⁵ in the foundation of the «Giornale agrario toscano» together with Cosimo Ridolfi⁶, and Lambruschini is the same who planned to deal with the review of Humboldt's works together with Carlo Cattaneo, as proved by Cattaneo's correspondence preserved in the rich archival fund “Copialettere Vieusseux” of the National Library of Florence (*Carteggio Lambruschini-Vieusseux*, 1998-2000). In the issue of the pedagogical magazine, some anthropological notes, deriving from the amount of data collected by the German in Central and South American exploration, are borrowed: Lambruschini also shows that he had read Humboldt's work, (obviously what he was interested in), and he had understood the importance of what can be called “life pictures”, in parallel to “natural pictures” emerging from his description of nature. Inside them we can also find descriptions of some diseases typical of the Equinox Regions, which Humboldt found studying South American peoples. Lambruschini delves into the particular matter of “cretinism” (that, for a certain period, was called by scientists “endemic cretinism”, on which a large literature flourished in the mid-nineteenth century) as observed by Humboldt among the peoples he visited. The German scientist is for Lambruschini the authority in this field of research, alongside other authorities (Popig, Ramond de Carboinieres, Iphofen, Wenzel, Wood and others), whose theses are now considered accepted by the scientific community, and therefore primary sources that do not even require an explanatory note. Reading various texts on this subject we note the singular application of the phytogeographic method – the presence and survival of plant and animal species based on altimetric and climatic factors – to detect presence or absence of people affected by cretinism pathology or degeneration, as it is called by most doctors in the mid-nineteenth century. According to the observations made by Humboldt there would be a maximum limit, as exists for plants, also for the presence of this pathology which is not exceed 14,000 feet (4,267 meters) in the Cordillera and in the Andes.

The second circumstance in which the name of Humboldt is found is inside the magazine «Memorie di religione, morale e letteratura», printed in Modena with different periodicity, starting from 1822. This is a catholic magazine open to articles and essays by authors not coming from the ecclesiastical world. Inside of sixth volume (year 1843), there is a reference to a medical topic that would emerge from reading the numerous data collected by Humboldt. The doctor and surgeon Carlo Speranza, died in Pavia in 1867 and author of a study titled *Odierno aumento del numero dei pazzi e dei suicidi*, an article - which we know from the introduction - was to be presented at *Congresso degli scienziati italiani di Torino* (1840), analyzes the topic of mental illness. Humboldt is regarded as a source of reliable data and records for seeing “a few fools among the savages of America”. Indeed, the description of people suffering from mental pathology or madness in Humboldt's travel diaries is really limited. Humboldt talks about it in the

⁴ See “Lambruschini Raffaello”, in *DBI, ad vocem*, on-line edition.

⁵ See “Vieusseux Giampietro”, in *Enciclopedia italiana, ad vocem*, on-line edition.

⁶ See “Ridolfi Cosimo”, in *DBI, ad vocem*, on-line edition.

fourth and fifth volumes of *Voyage* referring to all the madness caused by the use of particular herbs or to crazy attitudes, such as those of anthropophagy, that Humboldt was able to detect from the stories of the missionary fathers.

The thesis, according to which the data found by Humboldt is provided, is that in places where there is greater culture and excesses of civilization abound, there would be statistically a greater number of people with mental illnesses. Consequently, “in the countryside, the number of alienated persons is lower than in the cities”. The whole thread of the discourse leads to the thesis that only religion, both the natural one of the ancient peoples, and the secular one (for the author only the Catholic religion), “can be a salutary remedy for the onset of madness, and mental instability in general, since the balm of religion does not torment the spirit but rather raises it in search of higher truths, reinvigorating the soul with feelings of peace, consolation and tranquillity”.

Following the order of occurrences in catholic magazines, the next one is «L’Araldo della Pragmalogia cattolica», born in January 1844, and modified in the title in 1852 with the addition of subtitle “Scientific and literary scientific journal”. It is part of those Catholic magazines that had the pedagogical goals of educating the clergy and keeping them updated on editorial news, but also on the main news deriving from other Catholic countries in the world, publishing obituaries, and short reviews. For a long time, it was the official organ of the Diocese of Lucca.⁷ In 1858 it was published a historical-scientific lesson on earthquakes signed by anonymous “T.M.”, probably after the earthquake that stroke the Neapolitan provinces (Basilicata, 1857). Inside the article, published in two parts, Humboldt is mentioned in several places for his research, in particular for the ascent to the Chimborazo on June 23, 1802 and for some discoveries on the fauna of the Orinoco. Humboldt had observed, for example, the behavior of the crocodiles who, although silent, warn the earthquake in advance and realizing it, flee the water, heading into the clearing and howling. The “famous Humboldt”⁸, as the author defines him, would have hypothesized, with reference to telluric movements, a greater concentration of the latter on the equinoctial zone. Therefore, the author demonstrates to know the complete edition of *Voyage* and the ascension’s description to Chimborazo that had a great echo in all the major magazines of the world.

Humboldt and Civiltà Cattolica

The comparison with the most prestigious catholic review of that time, «Civiltà Cattolica»,⁹ provides us elements for understanding the sudden change of views occurred in Roman circles in the 60s of nineteenth century. Until that moment the German scientist had only gained esteem and admiration, especially in Roman circles. After returning from his South-

⁷ The priest Pietro Dal Poggetto, educated inside the Archbishop’s Seminary of Lucca, then Pietro Bartoli, another priest from Lucca clergy, were directors of the magazines; “L’araldo Cattolico” is counted among the liberal Catholic newspapers.

⁸ In the text, in Italian language “il chiarissimo Humboldt”.

⁹ It has a great diffusion in a short time (after four years of life it already boasts 13,0000 subscriptions). The inspirer and first editor of the magazine was Father Carlo Maria Curci, but it was above all Pope Pius IX who wanted it. The idea that led to the foundation of the magazine was to defend "Catholic civilization", as it was then conceived, threatened by the enemies of the Church, in particular by liberals and Freemasons, who were inspiring many leading lines of Risorgimento Italy.

American voyage, Humboldt visited his brother Ambassador Wilhelm (1805) guest in the diplomatic palaces of the Holy See. We know from the travel notebooks, that Marie- Noëlle Bourguet happily analyzed in the original version (BOURGUET, 2017) that Humboldt reached Rome where received all the honors, easily obtaining access to the Vatican Apostolic Library, being able to view the archaeological collections of Cardinal Borgia, and receiving all kinds of merits (in Rome the Pontifical Academy of Archeology included him among the correspondents in 1822 and the Accademia dei Nuovi Lincei appointed Humboldt honorary members in 1853).

The first reference in Jesuit magazine «Civiltà Cattolica» is in 1857 (VIII year, III series). Inside the article “Della moderna necromanzia”, where are described several episodes that took place in Geneva, Bavaria and also in France, Humboldt is defined the “venerable Nestor” of modern physics. Translating - considering that Nestor is known in mythology as the wisest of the Atrei kings who fought against the Trojans - Humboldt would be the wisest of the elderly living scientists. The episodes described were relative to imaginative ideas circulated: spiritate oracles on dining tables where appeared letters suggested by divine revelations, people who heard and translated spirits, animated wooden tables. The name of the German scientist is referred to in a letter in which Humboldt replies to Mr. Jobard, who had bothered him after having requested scientific findings also to Faraday. Inside the megazine the authors of «Civiltà Cattolica» published the entire letter, that we quote:

Avendo alcuni creduto che Alessandro di Humboldt, il quale s’era mostrato favorevole alle esperienze del sig. de Bois-Raymond intorno all’ elettricità muscolare ed avea fatto egli stesso in America parecchi sperimenti intorno all’ elettricità dei gimnoti e delle tremole, non fosse alieno dall’ ammettere non so quale spiritualizzazione elettrica della materia per ispiegare il fenomeno delle tavole parlanti; il sig. Jobard lo richiese per lettera del suo parere intorno a ciò, e ne ebbe la seguente risposta. “Berlino. 2 aprile 1856. Ella mi scrive, caro signore, una lettera al suo solito ingegnosa e graziosissima; ma io sono ben lungi dal poterle rispondere intorno alla semplice possibilità di diversi generi d’ elettricità, minerale, vegetale, animale, celebrale, dotata o no di libero arbitrio. Io per me ho sempre la debolezza di aver un santo orrore della spiritualizzazione del legno d’ abete e del misticismo degli psicografi. Ella accresce il mio spavento col fantasma di cotesto ente di ragione effimero, dotato d’ intelligenza per opera del concentramento dei pensieri raggianti dal cervello di coloro che circondano lo strumento. Ella sa che Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire diceva d’ aver trasudato in Egitto dall’ ossido di pensieri. Ella dirà che mia incredulità non è effetto che di pigrizia; mi sottometto di buon animo a questo biasimo, ma persuaso che il rincrescimento che io proverei di crederla tuttavia impigliata in questa via tenebrosa non toglierà nulla all’ amicizia che da sì gran tempo ella mi professa, confido nella sua indulgenza.”

Humboldt is still an authority. He is considered in a positive way, as a venerable wise scientist, and his words are proof that even science denies these paranormal manifestations. As we can declare the official religion - the Jesuits represented an official voice of the Catholic Church - uses Humboldt to consolidate his thesis against the paranormal.

Still in the 1860s - when the first three books of *Kosmos* were already published¹⁰ - Humboldt is presented as one of the greatest scientists of all time.¹¹ In two articles titled “Cosmogony”, appeared respectively in 1860 and 1861, the opinion on the scientist is more than positive. Indeed, in the reviews section of the vintage 1861, the praise of the very catholic Filippo Parlatore, published after Humboldt's death, is also highlighted (Parlatore, 1860).

Opinion changed suddenly in 1875 because of a Genoese, indeed we would say because of the release of the work of a Frenchman, Count Roselly de Lorgues,¹² who has published his monograph on Christopher Columbus some years before¹³. From that moment the Jesuits opinion on Humboldt turns sharply. Humboldt becomes the scientist who has questioned Colombo's role in the peaceful evangelization of South America and also the role and prestige of Humboldt work *Examen critique* is now questioned. Even within Humboldt's *Kosmos* there are several mentions of Columbus and his travels but all these occurrences have a laudatory tone.¹⁴

In a long article published on «Civiltà Cattolica» (year 1875) and titled “Istanza per la canonizzazione di Cristoforo Colombo”, Humboldt is described inexplicably as a tamper of the Colombo's biography.

Durante la gran voga in che era la storia dell'Irving, sopravvenne l'altra del celebre Alessandro de Humboldt, denominato dai Prussiani suoi concittadini l'Aristotile moderno, ad aggravare con più madornali errori la memoria di Cristoforo. Dove il primo si contentò di quattro volumi, questo secondo ne spese cinque a deturparlo dal lato morale e scientifico, a proposito della geografia del nuovo Continente. (...) Il novello Aristotile dei Prussiani trasformò Colombo in un mostro di vizii, dissimulatore, ignorante, truffatore, doppio, ipocrita, fanatico, invidioso, adultero, ingrato. Ond'è che i tre storici, i quali fino a sessant'anni indietro hanno procacciato più che altri di trattare dall'ombra questo glorioso cattolico, sono stati eretici e nemici della sua fede. La scuola storica dei protestanti si arrogò quindi come il patrimonio privilegiato la memoria del grande navigatore; e parve che non fosse più possibile ad altri strappargliela; giacché chi avrebbe avuta la temerarietà di contraddire un Humboldt, che dettava legge alle accademie d'Europa (...) ?¹⁵

From this article, appeared in 1875, the Prussian scientist becomes the enemy of Columbus.

¹⁰ Humboldt's *Kosmos* was published by Cotta from 1845 to 1862 (the last volume was published posthumous). There is also a French edition (translated by Charles Galusky and Hervé Faye, 1847-1859) and an Italian edition (translated by Giulio Vallini and Vincenzo Lazari, 4 voll., 1860).

¹¹ See «Civiltà Cattolica» 1860 (eleventh year, volume 5, series IV) and 1861 (twelfth year, volume 9, series IV, pp. 165 and ff.)

¹² French Americanist born in 1805 and died in 1897.

¹³ The most important Roselly de Lorgues book was *Christophe Colomb, histoire de sa vie et de ses voyages* (2 voll. 1856). It contains not only the biography and a large amount of archival documents but also presents reasons of postulator's cause of Christopher Columbus beatification.

¹⁴ We have counted 47 citations on Colombo in the volumes of *Kosmos*.

¹⁵ See serie IX, volume VII, fasc. 605, 24 agosto 1875.

Although Humboldt had made some mistakes on biographical aspects of Columbus life, it is enough to read his *Examen critique* and *Kosmos* to understand how great the appreciation for Columbus life and discoveries by the Prussian scientist was. Consequently, the opinion of «Civiltà Cattolica» writers changed radically, certainly influencing many Catholic readers in Italy and abroad.

The inexplicable paradigm shift of the Roman magazine did not actually bring serious consequences for the “priests-scientists”. It is enough to propose a list of names of these priests to demonstrate how the educated Italian clergy continued to read and appreciate Humboldt.

Humboldt and “priests-scientists”

In conclusion we present therefore a simple list of “priests-scientists” who have read and studied Humboldt, on which we are carrying out further research.

Among these priests there are geologists, geographers, volcanologists, all from ecclesiastical backgrounds. Following a merely chronological order, the first we present is the religious Teodoro Monticelli (1759-1845), prior of the Celestine fathers, who worked on volcanology and mineralogy with particular regard to the Kingdom of Naples and Vesuvius territories. Humboldt's estimator Teodoro Monticelli was also in correspondence with the German scientist (Monticelli, 1841).

The second religious in this list is Placido Zurla (1769-1834), Camaldolese monk, created Cardinal in 1823. Zurla considers Humboldt “the creator of modern geography” and Humboldt appreciated Zurla making several times refers to Zurla's works, particularly the book *Il Mappamondo di fra Mauro Camaldolese* (Zurla, 1806) inserted in the private library of the Prussian scientist (Stevens, 1863).

Finally, the last scientist we want to talk about is the famous Lombard geologist Antonio Stoppani (1824-1891). A leading figure in Italian nineteenth-century geology. Author of numerous works on Lombard geological formation and glaciers, He was a great popularizer and became famous for his best-seller *Il Bel Paese* (Stoppani, 1876). We can consider Stoppani a true pupil of Humboldt, as well as a careful reader of his work. Indeed, his famous book *Il Bel Paese* was directly inspired by Humboldt's *Tableau de la nature*, as we can read in the introductory pages of his book. Stoppani's aim, drawing inspiration directly from Humboldt, was to make known the naturalistic beauties of Italy through some “literary paintings”.

Stoppani can therefore be considered a priest-scientist clearly inspired by Humboldt. He had read *Kosmos*, quoting him several times, especially in the book on *Divina Commedia* (Stoppani, 1865) where he explores, giving a purely Christian interpretation, the subject of “the sense of nature”, starting from the reflections contained in the first volume of *Cosmos*.

This list of scientists from Catholic circles who confronted Humboldt, regardless of the fears expressed by «Civiltà Cattolica», can certainly be increased following further archival research, making contributions interested in the topic of Humboldt reception in Italy.

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