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Alexander von Humboldt and James Bryce Compared: The Geographical Factor in History

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Alexander von Humboldt's and James Bryce's travels in Latin America were separated by a century; nevertheless, both of them situated the region within a continental and worldwide framework. The two men emphasized the importance of geography as a factor that influenced history whenever they explained the development of peoples, both in their more "primitive" phases as well as in a more "advanced" state of civilization. Although Bryce's *South America* (1912) has often been disregarded by Bryce scholars, what is certain is that the work reveals important keys regarding the ways in which he understood geography as a true foundation of the historical development of nations, and humanity as a whole. This certainty, also present to good extent in Humboldt, has been highlighted in the present article.

KEYWORDS Alexander von Humboldt; James Bryce; anthropogeography; America and the history of the idea of the world

Les voyages en Amérique latine d'Alexander von Humboldt et de James Bryce ont été séparés par un siècle; cependant les deux voyageurs ont situé la région dans un cadre continental et mondial. Les deux hommes ont souligné en particulier l'importance de la géographie comme un facteur toujours lié à l'histoire quand ils expliquaient le développement des peuples, soit dans leurs états plus « primitifs », soit dans un état de civilisation plus « avancé ». Bien que les spécialistes de Bryce aient souvent négligé son œuvre *South America* (1912), ce qui est certain est que cette œuvre révèle des clés importantes en ce qui concerne les manières dont il a compris la géographie comme une vraie fondation du développement

David A. J. Murrieta Flores translated this article from Spanish to English

historique des nations, et de l'humanité tout entière. Cette certitude, visible en grande partie chez Humboldt aussi, est soulignée dans cet article.

MOTS CLÉS Alexander von Humboldt, James Bryce, l'anthropogéographie, l'Amérique et l'histoire de l'idée du monde

Alexander von Humboldt y James Bryce recorrieron América Latina con una distancia de un siglo, y ambos se propusieron situarla dentro de un marco continental y mundial. Ambos pusieron particular énfasis en la importancia de la geografía como un factor siempre unido a la historia al momento de explicar el desarrollo de los pueblos, tanto en sus fases más primitivas como en un estado de mayor civilización. Si bien el libro *South America* (1912) de Bryce ha sido a menudo despreciado por los estudiosos de este autor, lo cierto es que arroja claves importantes de la manera en que este autor entendía la geografía como un verdadero fundamento del desarrollo histórico de las naciones y la humanidad entera. Este convencimiento, también presente en buen medida en Humboldt, se ha puesto de relieve en el artículo presente.

PALABRAS CLAVE Alexander von Humboldt, James Bryce, antropogeografía, América y la historia de la idea del mundo

Within the abundant production of James Bryce, the travel book *South America. Observations and Impressions* (1912) has been the object of a certain indifference amongst Bryce scholars. Although the text is usually cited in the author's bibliography, it is in fact rare that it is analyzed or that the South American journey that originated it is studied. This scholarly neglect reflects the fact that *South America* has been considered a minor work. Bryce's thought about South Africa has certainly had better luck, receiving wider attention in the studies of his *oeuvre*. However, *South America* can awaken more interest if the ample theme of the text is considered, in which the author not only shows himself as a political thinker and international analyst but also as a sensitive scholar of geographic and historical questions and their interrelations.

A first key element about the particularity of the book emerges when Bryce points out that his journey through South America has reminded him of his youth and the reading he then made of memorable works such as Alexander von Humboldt's *Aspects of Nature* (1849)¹ and William Prescott the *History of the Conquest of Peru* (1847).² The South American journey implied feeding Bryce's curiosity for a region of which he had some notions thanks to a famous natural scientist and an equally celebrated historian. In *The American Commonwealth* (1888), his most recognized and acclaimed study about a country, Bryce makes his notorious

¹ The work was originally published in German in 1808 under the title de *Ansichten der Natur*. The English translation appeared in 1849.

² James Bryce, *South America. Observations and Impressions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), p. xvii.

formulation on the importance of the natural science model—specifically, biology—for the rigorous work of establishing historical facts.³ Perhaps his earlier interest in South America based on Humboldt and Prescott oriented him to see in natural science and history the foundations for the study of any country.

For their comprehensiveness and generality, as well as for being sourced in an extensive yet quick trip, Bryce's considerations in *South America* are ambitious, which is unsurprising for such a famous intellectual. Bryce traveled for four months in 1911 throughout the republics of Panama, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, and was quick to share the text in which he gathered his experiences with the press. In 1901 he had already been in Mexico, Cuba, and Jamaica, which is why *South America* also contains observations and conclusions about those countries.⁴ Thus, *South America* has general and essayistic reflections about Latin America as a whole. The main question that concerns Bryce is related to the political development achieved by Latin American nations at the time, which is why he did not limit himself to presenting the internal reality of these countries, but extended his attention to their links with Europe and the United States. (When discussing the regions we now conceive of as encompassing both the United States and Latin America, Bryce sometimes uses the term “America,” a practice we will follow in this article.)

A similar endeavor related to South America had perhaps not been undertaken since the times of Alexander von Humboldt, a comparable international celebrity who was also very interested in the connections between the countries he visited and their external counterparts. Humboldt had voyaged through the region almost a century earlier (1799–1804) and, just like Bryce would later do, he located American countries within the history and geography of their continent and the world. Reading Humboldt, it is easy to see his interest in a broad range countries, their natural resources, and their position on the map; regarding Bryce, we know his tendency to locate and classify countries within the scale of political civilization and the role they would play in the world theater depending on their national and/or imperial power. Given that both authors followed these themes with geography and history as fundamental background, this article establishes comparisons and contrasts between them on these aforementioned themes.

Bryce's World History with a Geographical Foundation

A recent scholar of Humboldt's scientific work summarizes it this way: “Humboldt did not so much treat regions as parts of the globe, but rather took the globe to be

³ James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (London/New York: Macmillan and Co., 1888), I, p. 9. There he refers to what he considers the main motive to study and value the institutions of the United States and writes that “its chief value lies in what may be called the laws of political biology which it reveals . . .” Shortly before that (pp. 3–4), he had indicated that in distinction to Tocqueville, whose proposal about the institutions of the United States seems to him too general and connected to his own interests as a Frenchman, his purpose was to study the specificity of the institutions and the people of the United States, doing the same for the history and traditions of its race, as well as its fundamental ideas and its material environment.

⁴ Héctor Domínguez Benito, *James Bryce y los fundamentos intelectuales del internacionalismo liberal (1864–1922)* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2018), p. 258.

composed of regions that had unique characters which were the result of complex networks of interlocking forces.”⁵ This kind of conceptualization can be found also in Bryce, as we will now see.

Even if Bryce is influenced by the British liberal canon of the idea of history, with its emphasis in the unity of human history (here the influence of Eduard A. Freeman) and in which it is a sort of university of the human (here the influence of William Gladstone),⁶ for him, geography was the fundamental perspective from which causes and processes that led to that human unity (mentioned by Freeman) could be shown and explained. Concretely, it is the anthropogeography of the German Friedrich Ratzel that offers a pertinent perspective in this sense.⁷ Bryce develops a dialogue with anthropogeography, especially its attempts to understand the diversity of countries and the unity of the humanity. This dialogue can be appreciated in the introduction that Bryce wrote for the work of Hans F. Helmolt about the history of the world, published in German and English in 1899 and 1901 respectively.⁸ In his introductory Bryce writes:

... geography is the necessary foundation of history, so that neither the course of a nation's growth nor its relation with other nations can be grasped by one who has not come to understand the climate, surface, and products of the country wherein the nation dwells.⁹

Bryce considers the question of how and when a valid history of the world emerged (with a geographic basis such as the one presented by Helmolt), which Bryce conceives as a universal history, but one that departs from studies typically labeled universal history. Bryce finds the answer in the research effort and the methodological rigor that history has utilized since the beginning of the nineteenth century, particularly since natural science was taken as a model by historians. Since then, historians saw their most rigorous and professional task the critical approach to sources, the rigorous establishment of facts and the search for laws among them, so as to facilitate their ordering and placement in a unity. This kind of procedure has made viable a history of all nations and all the relationships that have existed between them. One of the characteristics of this history is, then, the inclusion of small and large nations, as well as those that are “backward” and “advanced.” This inclusivity stems not only from procedural rules and in order not to leave any lacunae, but also because smaller or “backward” nations have found themselves

⁵ Stephen Gaukroger, *The Natural and the Human: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1739–1841* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 255.

⁶ Thomas Kleinknecht, *Imperiale und internationale Ordnung. Eine Untersuchung zum anglo-amerikanischen Gelehrtenliberalismus am Beispiel von James Bryce (1838–1922)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), p. 23.

⁷ Bryce takes Ratzel's *Völkerkunde* as his principal source of inspiration for writing the introduction to Helmolt's work. *Völkerkunde* was originally published in Leipzig between 1885 and 1888.

⁸ H. F. Helmolt, *Weltgeschichte* (Leipzig: Bibliogr. Inst., 1899–1900, 9 v.). The British version was titled *The World's History: A Survey of Man's Record* (London: Heinemann, 1901–1907, 8 v.). The North American version was titled *The History of the World: A survey of Man's Record* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1902, 8 v.), which is the one that will be cited here.

⁹ H. F. Helmolt, *The History of World*, I, p. xxxix.

bordering powerful ones, and have provided to them labor power and troops, without which the latter would have never been large or achieved as much. Besides, some small nations have a magnificent past in which they surpass others in some respect. This is the case, for example, of Iceland, which between the years 874 and 1264 had a splendid literature, superior to that of other peoples of Europe.¹⁰ Bryce maintains that these small nations have been stronger than others in the field of emotion and intellect. Large ones, in contrast, have stood out in war, politics, and commerce. Precisely what the small nations contribute in their field, like religion, philosophy, literature, or art, stands out for surviving beyond the places and circumstances of origin.

Bryce is also interested in how migrations occur,¹¹ in which geographical impacts are felt not only because peoples search for more agreeable climates, but also for higher quality food, both of which offer them an easier life. Bryce considers this last cause as quite important, exemplified by the movements of Aryans to India or of Germans to the territory dominated by Rome. In the most advanced state of civilization, a similar situation occurs when there is an excess of population, exemplified by the transit of Scots to the Irish Ulster or from the colony of New England to the Western zones of America, beyond the Appalachians. Another cause is the need of more labor power when the native population does not contribute enough (slave commerce by the English) or an intolerable temperature leads to the importation of slaves (the case of Europeans in America). Migrations due to conquest or religion do not form a part of the migrations induced by geographic or natural causes, affirms Bryce. Their origin is passion or emotion.

Nature has also dictated the sites at which the most advanced peoples develop the first seats of civilization and the lines through which commerce establishes a communication between them. They have been fertile agricultural basins, like those of the Nile or the Tigris and Euphrates in the Middle East, from where material, military, and artistic culture has propagated to adjacent or faraway countries alike. In the formation of nations, the natural borders represented by deserts, mountains, and oceans has been important. For Bryce, the rivers are not natural borders but political ones, as some geographers have maintained, because they actually unite the populations settled on either side. Bryce also points out an important contrast in the emergence of civilizations between the Old and New Worlds. While in the former they emerged in fertile basins of rivers in low zones, in America they had their origin in the high plateaus of Mexico (lake basins of Mexico and Texcoco) and of the Bolivian and Peruvian Andes, not in the warm fluvial valleys of Brazil. Except perhaps for the Mayans, in America nature has been too strong for man, holds Bryce.¹² In any case, nature has dictated that the fluvial and marine currents should be the main avenues for commerce and signal the sites for the foundation of important cities. More recently, railroads have also fulfilled

¹⁰ H. F. Helmolt, *History*, I, p. xxii.

¹¹ H. F. Helmolt, *History*, I, p. xxxii.

¹² H. F. Helmolt, *History*, I, p. xxxvi.

this function, even if in many cases they did not inspire a new structure of settlements that replaced the older one around rivers, for humanity holds great attachment for centuries-old homes.

Bryce recognizes the sense and fruitfulness of the search for geographic influences in the history based on the Ratzelian school. However, he also states the limitations of such an approach, among them can be found the observation that almost no nation or numerous and powerful people remains in the site of origin of its history; for that very same reason, the impact of geography on a nation's development isn't always paramount. Bryce cites the United States as an example. The history of its people, with its character and type of institutions, cannot be explained solely through geography. It is necessary to follow the origin of this people in the German woods, where it formed its political culture, from where it travels to England, organizing monarchically and converting to Christianity once there, then establishing its customs, laws, and institutions under the effect of its contacts with the Celts, Normans, and Danish, the very previous phase before translating all that tradition to North America.¹³

Does there exist a theme or unifying thread from which to write a history of the world in the style of Helmolt, so that the variety of histories and national or regional processes offer a coherent sense and allow appreciation of a unity in human diversity? Bryce points toward three themes: 1) the growing power of man over nature, with the consequent liberation from the penury it has imposed upon him, although always in contact with and dependent upon nature; 2) the gradual accumulation of knowledge and culture in humanity over time; 3) the spatial contraction of the world before humanity. Regarding growing human power before nature, Bryce emphasizes the conquest of frontiers and natural obstacles thanks to demographic growth, with the subsequent expansion of strength, energy, and application this presumes, as well as the improvement of bodily condition that results from improvements in diet, housing, etc., over time. The accumulation and perfection of useful knowledge that the concurrence and communication of many nations brings with it, with a parallel intercourse among the sciences, spreads the accumulated perfected knowledge among individuals as no one could have previously imagined. Additionally, those forms of knowledge are translated quickly and efficiently into the generation of wealth. Intellectual intercourse has facilitated the dissemination of inventions or institutions, some of them economic, like the bank, coin, fiscal and insurance systems, economic corporations or associations, other policy, such as the jury beyond executive power, representative government, and the union of political entities into a federation. Finally, the contraction of the world, generated by humans' efforts, enables the human species to communicate and move throughout diverse parts of the planet with even greater smoothness, easiness, and security.

Bryce's conclusion in his introduction to the history of the world by Helmolt is that the main topic of this kind of study is the transmission and expansion of culture,

¹³ H. F. Helmolt, *History*, I, p. xli.

in which there have been two great efforts undertaken by a humanity induced by nature. The first one begins with the first records of humanity all the way to the seventh century AD, articulated by the cultural transmission of Egypt, Assyria, and Phoenicia to Greece, and from Greece to Rome, which, after assimilating civilizations and creating a new one for its vast empire, perpetuated itself for centuries thanks to the sense of unity of Christianity and its preservation of Greco-Latin legal, literary, and religious forms. The second starts in the eleventh century, and consolidates in the fifteenth century, covering the great modern expansion best articulated by commerce, science, and creativity in ideas, even though conquest marked communication and assimilation between powerful and lesser peoples. Bryce maintains that questions such as finding a law of progress and making prophecies about the future are not matters for true historians, and they should not form a part of the history of the world.

Humboldt's Cosmopolitanism

Humboldt also had ideas about a history of the world, and in his case a stimulus for such ideas did not come exactly from natural science (natural history) but from political, esthetic and philosophical thought. As we know, so as to write with authority about America, the traveler read, acknowledged, and took a position before Enlightenment authors who had famously dealt with the American topic, like William Robertson and abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal. It is worth highlighting the latter, among whose works we find the *Histoire des deux Indes* (1770),¹⁴ an extensive text that was not solely composed by him, but also by other Enlightenment authors, Diderot among them.¹⁵ It was not the first work to be read with much interest in France and Enlightenment Europe, in search of the historical and civilizational significance of America. Voltaire had previously published *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) and *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763). Something notable about Raynal's history, however, was its extraordinary dissemination.

As pointed out by Ansart, Raynal and Voltaire shared a positive opinion of the religious liberty enjoyed by the Anglo-American settlements, particularly in Pennsylvania, which in Raynal's work is represented positively in comparison to the intolerant puritanism of New England. Nonetheless, this latter colony was praised for its industriousness and economic welfare. In the end, the panorama offered by Pennsylvania awakened more sympathies in the authors of the *Histoire*,

¹⁴ The complete title was *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des européens dans les deux Indes*.

¹⁵ The work was widely disseminated in Europe and translated, with notable rapidity, to the languages of the rest of the countries on that continent. It is not surprising that it became the most influential book in France and part of Europe regarding information and expectations about the North American country (between 1770 and 1820 around 30 editions appeared, having experimented revisions and additions in 1774 and 1780. These numbers do not include, by the way, the illegal printings of the text). Guillaume Ansart, "From Voltaire to Raynal and Diderot's *Histoire des deux Indes*. The French *Philosophes* and Colonial America," in *America through European Eyes. British and French Reflections on the New World from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, eds. Aurelian Craiutu and Jeffrey C. Isaac (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), pp. 71–89.

since the colony procured a noticeable prosperity without the exclusion or victimization of the indigenous peoples. Property rights, impulse and recognition of work, republican spirit in government, etc., were the qualities of public life in the most valuable societies of North America, and French readers saw abundant praise for the simplicity and virtue in which their existence developed, so contrasting to the desire for luxury and the pretentious spirit of the loathed circles of power in Europe.

Voltaire and Raynal formulated these commendations from their perspectives as citizens of the world, which is to say as examples of an Enlightenment cosmopolitanism that emphasized utility as universal principle of coexistence, above national rivalries, foremost among peoples of different civilizations.¹⁶ The main binding force in this cosmopolitan sense was commerce, in which was seen an active capacity to dispense its utility to all of humanity and from whose impulse naturally emerged a desire for intellectual exchange. Raynal questioned colonial domination and European pretensions of superiority precisely because of the scarce utility it offered to the peoples of different latitudes. He was convinced of the viability of an equal, free relationship between Europeans and Americans, based on commercial sociability and intellectual communication.¹⁷

Humboldt assimilated this principle of commerce as a connective factor between peoples, a creator of a genuine international network of knowledge and mutual benefit. A densely populated New World, prosperous in its commerce and industry, capable of an ample consumption of imported goods and inhabited by free peoples, could only benefit Europeans. To support this idea, Humboldt took the metaphor of Enlightenment to highlight the importance of dissemination of the highest intellectual culture, that which, after emerging in Greece and being revived by Europe, generated welfare in the nations of that continent, extending toward the West, enlarging the space of its action and reaching ever farther into the world.¹⁸ The very logic of commerce and intellectual exchange between peoples determined, according to Humboldt, this civilized advance, and created a feedback effect toward from whence the civilization came: if Europe granted liberty and dignity to the American colonies, surely it would still enjoy in return the welfare and vitality that it had itself granted.

These ideas were related to one of Humboldt's basic components regarding his notion of the world, a simple but effective one when it came to explain, in his *Vues des Cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (1810), the meaning to be found in the diversity of expressions of human civilization. It is his consciousness about "the uniform and progressive march

¹⁶ Ottmar Ette, *Weltbewusstsein. Alexander von Humboldt und das unvollendete Projekt einer anderen Moderne* (Göttingen: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2002), pp. 59–62.

¹⁷ Heinz Gollwitzer, *Geschichte des weltpolitischen Denkens* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), I, pp. 262–85, exposes Raynal's contrasting profile as representative of the French current of exoticism and rousseau sentimentality and an analyst of world order who was moved by a certain sense of Realpolitik.

¹⁸ Ottmar Ette, *Weltbewusstsein*, p. 61. Ette quotes here a passage of Humboldt's travel account of South America in a recent German version: Alexander von Humboldt, *Reise in die Äquinotial-Gegenden des Neuen Kontinents* (Frankfurt a. M./Leipzig: Insel, 1991), II, p. 1465, whose original French version is *Rélation historique du voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent, 1799–1804* (1814–1825).

of human spirit,”¹⁹ a concept that allowed him to incorporate pre-Hispanic American peoples whose creativity—primarily in esthetic terms—could seem rough and primitive in comparison to its classical Greek and European counterpart, but nonetheless interesting from the point of view of human history.²⁰ In fact, studying works such as the heavy Aztec monoliths and the pre-Hispanic codexes, according to Humboldt, should be of interest to any cosmopolitan European. It was necessary for the appreciation of that aforementioned march of civilization, the development of the consciousness of the world. For Humboldt, it was not enough to know oneself as an inhabitant of a part of the world (a nation, a religion, a philosophy, etc.) in order to comprehensively understand what the world was. It was important to appreciate that progressive march of human spirit—only thus will one know what the world was. The consciousness that each people, with their culture and therefore their insertion into nature, contribute to this chain of progression, make all peoples inherently valuable as individual links within the world. In this conception of the progressive march of human spirit not only was this spirit dispersed over time but also throughout space, occurring, as previously noted, in the sun’s direction, East to West, determining the growing importance of America for the world.

Humans and Nature at the Continental Level: A Comparative View of Humboldt and Bryce

Let us now return to Bryce’s ideas. At the beginning of chapter XIV of *South America* the following passage can be found, which gives us one of the keys in terms of the manner in which Bryce approached Latin American reality from a geographic perspective:

Alexander Hamilton bade his fellow citizens to think continentally; and Herodotus, in the short introduction prefixed to his history, explains its theme as being an account of the relations of two great continents, Europe and Asia, and of the reasons which produced such recurring strife between them. Let us attempt to think a little of the southern part of the Western world as a whole, in its relations as a continent to the other continents, and especially to that continent with which it is connected by a narrow neck of land, the Isthmus of Panama, and which has drawn its name from the same navigator.²¹

Following this idea, Bryce articulates his basic views about the physical constitution of America in a chapter dedicated to the recapitulation of the two Americas and the relationship between South America and Europe. Bryce, then, starts from the fact that America is formed by two great masses of earth clearly discernible in direction from north to south.

¹⁹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Vistas de las cordilleras y monumentos de los pueblos indígenas de América* (México, siglo XXI, 1979), I, p. 18.

²⁰ Humboldt supports this in an introduction to the year 1813 in *Vistas de las cordilleras*, pp. 5–15.

²¹ James Bryce, *South America*, p. 484.

Bryce finds the same fundamental characteristics in the two great blocks of earth that compose this mass.²² Both are crossed by a great mountain range (interrupted sometimes by deep valleys and sometimes by plateaus), which is to be found much closer to the west coast than to the east one. A great desert extends over the western part of both blocs, and in each of them the desert contains a great lake within a basin. In the north, as in the south, a pair of gigantic rivers chart their course, equally provided of riverbanks bathed by oceanic waters (colder in the south, warmer in the north); in both great masses more rain falls on the eastern side. The location of a large part of South America in the equatorial zone is a more or less perceptible difference with North America, but still, the climates of each region are generally similar. The only relevant climatic factor is temperature, which simultaneously determines differences within South America in ways not possible in the United States and Canada, except in some of their most extreme, smaller regions. In these countries, for example, the humid cold weathers that affect wide extensions of Chile and Argentina do not exist, while their areas of scorching heat are limited to Texas, Florida, and Louisiana.

This strictly physical exposition of the continent partly continues Humboldt's own, mainly in the summary he offered in the first pages of his *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle Espagne* (1811), where he also referred to matters of temperature and endowment with ranges, rivers, and seas in the whole of America.²³ However, Humboldt fundamentally emphasized the question of altitude, partly because it was a widespread belief that American mountain ranges were the highest elevations in the world when he lived; his naturalist's interest, additionally, urged him to investigate the succession of landscapes in the wide scale of altitudes in his sight. The peculiarity of nature in Hispanic-American countries, mainly in the elevated zones of plateau, was the moderation of a heat that, because of latitude, should have existed, but that was diminished by altitude. In the broad northern mass of America extremes in temperature were recorded, notable due to the width of the continent there, and the continuation of its mass toward the polar area: summers akin to those of Naples are followed by winters proper to Germany.²⁴

Let us return to Bryce, and begin to examine the method of combining geographical and historical perspective that both he and Humboldt shared. It is necessary to note that from his predominantly political interest in social and cultural conditions of American countries, Bryce locates the great division between North America and South America in the outline of the Río Grande, making Mexico and Central America a part of South America. From here on out, this essay will use Bryce's terminology for geographical considerations.

Guided by an evident political interest, Bryce refers to the ways in which independent South American states have emerged from the effect of separations or distancing dictated

²² James Bryce, *South America*, p. 488. Henceforth, the exposition of physical and socio-political characteristics of both Americas will be done by summarizing what Bryce states in chapter XIV of his book.

²³ We use the Spanish edition: Alejandro de Humboldt, *Ensayo político sobre el reino de la Nueva España* (México: Porrúa, 1966) pp. 18–33.

²⁴ Humboldt, *Ensayo político*, p. 27.

by geography. The isles of Saint Domingue and Cuba,²⁵ for example, have accomplished their independence by responding to their geographic situation, suggesting that nature itself has compelled them to form republics without relationship to their continental counterparts. Nevertheless, within South America there are also decisive geographical separations, such as the one that mediates between Chileans and Peruvians (a desert) or between the former and the Argentinians (the mountain range). Paraguay has remained isolated for a long time because of forest masses, whose isolating effect has only been weakly surpassed ever since the country started to communicate through steamships. The following paragraph can serve as synthesis of Bryce's idea about the trace of physical configuration upon the spatial disposition of American republics:

Where one part of a nationality is cut off from the other parts by the sea, or by deserts, or by dense forests, any peculiarities that already belonged to it tend to develop further and become intensified, because they are not affected by contact from without; and such a part, moreover, being isolated, attains a stronger consciousness of itself as a separate social and political entity.²⁶

Here we have an understanding of the influence of geography with an accent upon the importance of natural borders, which are in this case oceans, forests, and deserts. Great changes come from contact with the outside. The following paragraph also seems key inasmuch as it points toward one of the ways in which environmental influence can determine the living conditions of a country:

Not less important is the influence of physical environment in modifying both the race itself and the economic conditions of its life. In Mexico, for instance, the existence of a compact area of fertile soil around the lakes on whose shores the semi-civilization of the men of Tezcuco and Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) arose, created in that area a comparatively large population of pure Spanish blood and a still larger one of mixed blood which ultimately became the core of the Mexican republic and enabled it not only to hold together the outlying territories, but, also, when it got a strong ruler, to set up a strong centralized administration.²⁷

In a similar way to Mexico, countries like Chile and Uruguay have profited from a demographic agglomeration supported by an agriculture that has allowed the environment to be populated. Once populations grow and the communication factor sufficiently intervenes (allowing the formation of public opinion), the sentiment of union and national identity is rooted, creating the conditions for true nations. In Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina, a national sentiment is permitted by an environment favorable to contacts, in ways not present in countries beset by a more uneven geography.²⁸ Bryce also mentions the limited development near the oceans, a consequence of the material and intellectual path Latin American peoples charted. According to Bryce, only Chile has marine activity of some importance.²⁹ South America is characterized by a little-known central area,

²⁵ James Bryce, *South America*, p. 429.

²⁶ James Bryce, *South America*, p. 429.

²⁷ James Bryce, *South America*, p. 430.

²⁸ James Bryce, *South America*, p. 441.

²⁹ James Bryce, *South America*, p. 431.

remaining thus because of a lack of exploration and contact with maritime areas. Bryce maintains that the historical preference shown by South Americans of Spanish descent for high settlements has had obvious results, but Brazil and the countries of the “Southern Cone” (mainly Argentina), with their railroad projects, the growth of white migrant population, and the allure of capital that have recently left their mark,³⁰ apparently distinguish a decisive historical rupture with the kind of settlement prevailing in South America for centuries. As can be seen, the geographic, communicative, and expansive influence of railroad becomes important, mainly when it comes to economic progress, since all those countries are also the ones most advanced in the path toward becoming Bryce’s “true republics” (see article by Ricardo Ledesma Alonso in this issue of *Terrae Incognitae*).

After explaining the way in which Bryce sees the South American human theater, based on nature and the continental frame, let us turn to Humboldt, who referred to the conditioning or determination by geographic environment in relation to the subsistence activities of the first inhabitants, not to political or administrative demarcations. The German traveler had already highlighted, in works such as *Essai sur la géographie des plantes* (1805) and its complement *Tableau physique des régions équatoriales*, the barrier effect exerted by vegetal masses like the forests of South America, forcing the indigenous peoples to procure their sustenance through gathering and sowing before hunting or even fishing.³¹ For Humboldt, this explained the preference that Native Americans had had for settling in high zones, surpassing even the 3000 meters, from which they had no longer descended, not even when they already had the means to settle in low, fertile plains with good weather. This situation, which showed to Humboldt the importance of customs in geographic distribution, also made him notice, during his journey, a continuous contrast between the population of the coast and of the mountain, consisting not only of a more relaxed, lazy attitude among the peoples of the coast but also of the little interrelationship between them and those established in the plateaus. The high plateau population abstained from descending into the coasts not only because of the threat of fevers that reigned there, but also because of attachment to the physical environment in which they had lived for centuries. The contrast between the inhabitants of both environments was understood by Humboldt partly as a result of the different characters rooted in distinct forms of dealing with nature.³² Still, he also noted that in all of Spanish America there was an open antipathy between the inhabitants of the hot, low zones and those of the higher plateaus, even suggesting that upon American soil the prejudices between northern and southern Europeans are reproduced.³³ The peoples of high territories accused the others of fickleness and

³⁰ James Bryce, *South America*, pp. 431, 566, 579.

³¹ This essay on the geography of plants was the first work on an American topic published by Humboldt upon his return to Europe. Clarence Glacken, *Huellas en la playa de Rodas. Naturaleza y cultura en el pensamiento occidental desde la Antigüedad hasta finales del siglo XVIII* (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 1996), pp. 502–6, offers commentary of great interest about the importance of this work in the history of scientific thinking.

³² Humboldt, *Ensayo político*, pp. 245–6.

³³ Humboldt, *Ensayo político*, p. 482.

instability in business, and the lowlanders in turn accused the highlanders of coldness and dryness. With these observations, Humboldt showed that in America contrasts and struggles were rooted in differences in altitude, whereas in Europe these divides were explained according to latitude. Without a doubt, it was a fine observation, showing the relevance of the altitude dimension, even in the political arena.

Bryce and Humboldt on the History of America

In Humboldt's view, so beholden to topography and altitude, Hispanic-America contrasted with Anglo-America by being inhabited mostly by authentic "mountain people,"³⁴ as this German traveler called them in his works, a type of contrast does not appear so remarked upon by Bryce in his general reflections about geographic influence in the history and culture of South America. The "mountainous" condition—as Humboldt called it—of the population of Mexico, Peru, Colombia, or Ecuador, revealed a fundamental aspect of the cultural development of these peoples, an aspect without as much importance for Bryce, who, in doing comparisons between North and South America, between countries of Teutonic and Latin political traditions, opted for giving priority to the latitude dimension. It is clear that he does not register in South America that dynamism of the Teutons, who, according to Bryce, after emerging as a people or "race" in the German woods, migrated and entered a dynamic of cultural transmission not present in the peoples of South America. There, the model of cultural development has been precisely one in which cultural transmission is not favored—perhaps even resisted.

Regarding Bryce's observations about North and South America, in contrast to Humboldt, he highlights both common and contrasting aspects, in the same way he did when it came to geography. Among the common aspects, he remarks that: 1) both zones were already inhabited by peoples altogether distinct from Europeans as the latter discovered them, some of which, thanks to a benevolent nature, had made civilizatory advances, while the rest remained in "savage" state; 2) in both subcontinents, conquest was easy due to superiority in weapons and discipline; 3) in both subcontinents almost all the peoples earned their independence from the countries whence their European population came.

As for differential aspects, the British writer remarks³⁵: 1) In North America there was almost no mixing (except for French population) between natives and European colonizers, but south of the Río Grande there indeed was a mix from which resulted the mixed race (*mestizo*) populace, conforming the middle-class of all but two Hispanic-American republics; 2) the hotter climate of South America disgusted the European population and explained their aversion for farming and manual activities in general, which led them to require the indigenous population undertake these tasks, reducing them to a condition of servitude, in similar fashion to what happened with blacks (enslaved) in the south of North America; 3) the exploitation of precious metals flourished in South America, in contrast to the dedication to agriculture in

³⁴ Humboldt, *Vistas de las cordilleras*, p. 13.

³⁵ James Bryce, *South America*, p. 491–5.

North America, with the consequent fondness of a part of Mexico and Peru's population for luxury and gifts in a way not present in the other subcontinent, where life resulted more industrious and austere; 4) the majority of migrants to North America practiced commerce and trades, whereas in South America, it was mostly adventurers in search of fortune who arrived.

As the reader has probably realized, Bryce is also interested in recent historical questions that he considers insufficiently elucidated at the time of writing. Two of them grab most of his attention, inasmuch as they are issues that for the first time appear in human history on the American continent.³⁶ One is related to the rise and mixture of races, about which Bryce considers there are not enough data and therefore contributes only conjecture. Another series of inquiries are related to the capacity of the European race to multiply and prosper in tropical countries. These points of racial and sanitary questions have not been dealt with here because, ever since his introduction to Helmolt, the British writer presented them as issues still in process of clearing up in relation to the geographic framework, even though he certainly demonstrates to have drawn quite clear conclusions in his book about South Africa about whites and sanitation.³⁷

Returning to the contrasting factors between North and South America according to Bryce, now in the governmental and administrative areas, the following are worth noting³⁸:

1) In North America, self-government was practiced through state, municipal, and county assemblies, with the incorporation of the jury for civil and criminal matters, without much interference from the governors that arrived from England; in Hispanic-America the government was dictated by ordinances and mandates from Spain, or from the viceroy and the general captain of each demarcation, with lucrative positions reserved for the Spanish and granted to those favored by the court or the ruler in turn; 2) in Hispanic-America the power of the Church equaled or rivaled the civil one, thanks to an ecclesiastical hierarchy that, even if less controlled by the Pope than in Europe, displayed great influence in the metropolitan court and in the consciences of the people at large.

The step toward becoming republics meant for South Americans a change of greater magnitude than for North Americans, although it subsequently led to convulsions and constant troubles in the former. In contrast, in North America there was demographic and territorial consolidation of two great peoples, while in the subcontinent of the south, entities emerged that, under the name of republics, had little in common with the form of government of their namesake, let alone its essence and civic culture. In South America, the population already had less community of ideas and sentiments with the metropolis than the people of North America, making the break with Spain easier and more decisive, apart from the comparatively inferior level of enlightenment and institutional

³⁶ James Bryce, *South America*, p. xxiv.

³⁷ James Bryce, *Impressions of South Africa* (New York: The Century Co., 1898), p. 10–5.

³⁸ James Bryce, *South America*, pp. 495–501.

direction compared to the northern subcontinent. A common note to all countries of the New World has been the absence of artificial difference and of formal rank. The South Americans could be willing to withstand a king but not a dictator, and even if it is true that among them prevail great differences of wealth and social hierarchy, it is also true that the latter is based largely upon different educational levels. In North America the influence of these factors can be confirmed, maintains Bryce, but there, the color of skin is a much more decisive cause for differentiation.

Finally, Bryce remarks that because of their historical development, American countries have come to conform to, once independent, a “system of States”³⁹ in the German sense of the term. In other words, these countries have not exerted nor do they exert any influence in the politics of the Old World. The United States are the only exception, due to their interference in the events of some countries in Africa (Liberia, Congo) and Asia (Philippines, Hawaii, Samoa). Among the countries of the southern part of America two subsystems can be distinguished, one formed by Mexico and the five countries of Central America, the other by the remaining 11 of the great southern bloc, in which a model of equilibrium in the style of eighteenth-century Europe can be perceived. In this sense, three countries (Argentina, Chile, Brazil) keep the rules of the game and determine the zone’s peacefulness on the basis of their barely contained, muted aspiration to obtain more territory.

Conclusion: Toward South America’s Economic Integration into the World

What do Humboldt’ and Bryce’s reflections about the geographical factor in Latin American (or South American, according to Bryce’s terms) history amount to?

Humboldt and Bryce evaluated the situation of the countries of Spanish America when the kind of dominion or prevailing political dynamic of previous times was seemingly about to change. Humboldt journeyed when the Spanish government, along with many others in Europe, resented the advance of libertarian and revolutionary ideas, adverse to their colonial domain, making the dissolution or transformation of empires in the New World a distinct possibility. Bryce’s visit to South America was simultaneous with the revolution in Mexico against Porfirio Díaz as well as the full affirmation of the republican character of South America after 1898. Both travelers had the feeling of possible profound imminent changes in the region, or at least very proximate, but they did not find in the internal situation of countries or even the subcontinents (or the entire continent) clear indications about what would happen.

But the principal conclusions of Humboldt and Bryce about the foreseeable future of the Latin American countries are related to their economic circumstances and also involved the United States. Both authors assumed, with their common supposition of the transformational and civilizing character of communications, above all those of sea-bound quality, that by world pressure and convenience it was desirable to realize the inter-oceanic

³⁹ James Bryce, *South America*, pp. 501–3.

communication between Atlantic and Pacific. This was achieved in Panama, a historical event to which Bryce refers both in his introduction to Helmholt's book as well as in *South America*, where he celebrates it as an extraordinary work that demonstrated the transformative influence of the technical and organizational capacity of the United States.⁴⁰ Humboldt had only gone so far as to remark upon seven possible points to establish that communication in Mexico and Central America.⁴¹ Both travelers studied the links already present among inhabitants of those countries and the rest of the world, mainly through commerce, industry, or colonization, in order to define the profile of the relationship and to have an idea about how it could report maximum shared utility. Humboldt, by exposing his opinions about the best sites on the map of the Spanish territories for inter-oceanic communication, addresses (almost directly) the Spanish authorities, urging them not to reject the aid of foreigners in these matters.⁴² Bryce is optimistic when it comes to the circumstances that surround South America, including, step by step, a larger North American and European influence in the subcontinent, mainly in the "Southern Cone." This was due to the transmission of Teutonic cultural elements that favored progress, such as railways, which began to cross the *pampas* of Argentina and elsewhere.

Indubitably, both travelers deploy an approach to Latin America that emphasizes the actual degree of sociability of the inhabitants and the potential links that these countries can establish with the rest of the world. The repetitive logic of human settlements in high zones and the limited sociability and expansion created by this scenario pointed toward patterns somewhat different from those verified in Asian and European history, principally in Bryce's system. In any case, by highlighting the altitude data, Humboldt manages to delineate a factor whose obstructive effect for the desired social and economic unity becomes already obvious and burdensome during the last years of the Spanish rule in America. Based on this same factor and the state-system in South America, Bryce completes the frame of an insufficient political functionality and cohesion in and among these countries. Along with other causes, the geographical factor is relevant when Bryce addresses the accidental character of Latin American nations and their relative isolation from the world.

Notes on contributor

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⁴⁰ H. F. Helmholt, *History*, pp. xviii, xxxv; James Bryce, *South America*, p. 17–36.

⁴¹ Humboldt, *Ensayo político*, pp. 8–17.

⁴² Humboldt, *Ensayo político*, p. 18.