250th Anniversary of Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859)

Alexander von Humboldt and the earth system sciences*

Thursday, 21st and Friday, November 22nd 2019

*Multilingual conference, open to all, subject to availability

Amphithéâtre
Institut de physique du globe de Paris
1, rue Jussieu 75005 Paris
www.ipgp.fr/conference-humboldt
Alexander von Humboldt was born 250 years ago in Berlin, Prussia, and spent half of his life abroad, notably in Paris. Physicist and naturalist traveler (explorer and travel writer) of the Enlightened and Romantic Europe, he contributed to many scientific fields developed in the early nineteenth century, including physical geography, geology, geomagnetism, plant geography, climatology, and others, and showed the way for a holistic worldview (Weltanschaung), inspiring the pioneers of ecology, the ideas of Biosphere and Gaia, and what historians of natural sciences called “Humboldtian science”, including the human history of Nature. He names the living world, or Nature, as a whole like no other scientist (cities, rivers, mountain ranges, and ocean currents, not to mention penguins and squid). He explored the Earth as a planet in the solar system from the deepest mines to the highest summits of volcanoes, accompanying the birth of modern geological thought and global geophysics, building the base of what is now called ecology, seen as a set of bio-physico-chemical processes in which Mankind is only one actor among others. His visionary systems thinking profoundly influenced Darwin, Russian soil scientists, Vernadsky, and still today Lovelock, the ecological movement and what we now call the Earth System Sciences or Earth System Science. Deeply liberal and democratic, admirer of the American and French revolutions, anti-colonialist, his ethnographic and anthropological work and sociology of social misery owe much to his unconventional radical conception of freedom.
**PROGRAM**

**Thursday November 21st, 2019**  
*Société de Géographie - 184 Bd Saint-Germain, Paris*

**18:00 >** Conference (in French) « Alexandre de Humboldt : du Cosmos à l’Anthropocène » by Gilles Fumey and Jérôme Gaillardet.

**Friday November 22nd, 2019**  
*Institut de Physique du Globe de Paris*

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**Morning: ORAL SESSIONS**

*9:00 >* Literature, history of sciences and political sciences.

**Chairman:** Bruno Latour (Sc.-Po Paris)  
Laura Walls (U. Notre-Dame, Etats-Unis)  
*On Humboldt’s Planet: Realizing Gaia in the Nineteenth Century*

**Ottmar Ette** (U. Potsdam, Allemagne)  
*Alexandre de Humboldt et son Tableau physique des Andes et pays voisins*

**John Tresch** (EHESS, U. Londres, UK)  
*How to Draw an Incomplete Cosmos: Humboldt and Natural Philosophy in 1844*

*10:30 coffee break*

**11:00 >** Natural sciences (geophysical, ecological, critical zone sciences).

**Chairman:** Sébastien Dutreuil (CNRS)  
Jean-Paul Poirier (IPGP, Académie des Sciences Paris)  
*Humboldt, Biot, Gay-Lussac et le magnétisme terrestre*

**Friedhelm von Blanckenburg** (GFZ Potsdam, Freie U. Berlin, Allemagne)  
*How Biota shapes Earth’s Surface, a geochemical perspective*

**Stephen T. Jackson** (US Geological Survey and U. of Arizona, Etats-Unis)  
*Humboldt’s Conservation Legacy: Biodiversity and Nature on a Changing Planet*

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**Afternoon: WORKSHOPS**

*The afternoon will be devoted to two public workshops aiming at crossing disciplinary different points of view around Alexander von Humboldt visions at the time of the Anthropocene:*

**14:00-15:30 >** Theme 1 # Nature-Cosmos-Ecology: How the public awareness of the current anthropocene crisis allows us rethinking our relationship and dependency to the Earth?

**Moderator:** Amy Dahan (CNRS)  
**Participants:** Stefan Brönnimann (U. Bern), Carina Hoorn (U. Amsterdam), Jacques Grinevald (IHEID Geneva), Ottmar Ette (U. Potsdam)

*15:30 : coffee break*

**16:00-17:30 >** Theme 2 # Science & communication: with the emergence of the Anthropocene, how does Humboldt’s thought help to overcome the disconnections between the scientific expertise and social and political actors?

**Moderator:** Soraya Boudia (U. Paris)  
**Participants:** Marie Noëlle Bourguet (U. Paris Diderot), Laura Péaud (U. Grenoble-Alpes), Sebastian Grevsmühl (EHESS), Franco Farinelli (U. Bologne)

*17:30 >* Concluding remarks : Humboldt and the Anthropocene by Michel Lussault (ENS Lyon)
The idea of this one-day colloquium on Alexander von Humboldt is to bring together specialists from various disciplines that today cover the many fields that Humboldt’s work and ideas have contributed to, in particular in his major unfinished multi-volume masterwork Kosmos (1845-1862), including an index of more of 1100 pages. If possible, a visit to Humboldt’s collections at the Museum of Natural History in Paris will be organized. We wish to show how the scientific work of this greatest encyclopedic scientist from the first half of Nineteenth-century Europe is more than ever at the heart of the questions related to our home planet Earth today and to the questions posed by the epistemological and ontological novelty of the Anthropocene concept.

Organizers
J. Gaillaret (IPGP, U. Paris, IUF) and G. Fumey (Sorbonne U.)

Scientific committee
J. Gaillaret (IPGP, U. Paris), G. Fumey (Sorbonne U.), F. von Blanckenburg (GFZ Potsdam), B. Latour (Sciences Po, Paris), J. Grinevald (IHEID, Geneva)

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