

THE HISTORICAL PROFESSION IN GERMANY AND AMERICA:
INTERVIEWS WITH THE PRESIDENTS OF THE
AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION AND THE
GERMAN HISTORIKERVERBAND

James M. McPherson and Manfred Hildermeier interviewed by
Christof Mauch and Richard F. Wetzell

The text below presents excerpts from interviews with James McPherson and Manfred Hildermeier. McPherson is George Henry Davis '86 Professor of American History at Princeton University and served as president of the AHA in 2003. Our interview with Prof. McPherson took place at the German Historical Institute in Washington in November 2003. Hildermeier is Professor of Eastern European History at the University of Göttingen and has been chairman of the Verband der Historikerinnen und Historiker Deutschlands (VHD) since 2000. We spoke with him at his home in Göttingen in December 2003. The interview with Prof. Hildermeier was translated from the German by Dona Geyer.

1. How did you come to the study of history?

McPherson: In high school I did not have any particular interest in history and did not have very good history teachers. In the first semester of college I took a course—a typical course on the history of Western civilization—that really turned me on because it was the first time that I had ever really been challenged to try and understand something that at first was totally confusing to me. I wound up being more interested in American history, so by my junior year in college I decided that I might go on to graduate school. I guess my professors at college were a kind of role model for me.

Growing up in Minnesota and attending a small college there, I had never actually been to the American South, but in the late 1950s it seemed like an exotic, mysterious, puzzling, in some ways bizarre place. These were the years of Southern resistance to the 1954 Supreme Court decision. So I went to Johns Hopkins University to do my graduate work in Southern U.S. history under C. Vann Woodward, who was the foremost Southern historian at the time. While I was at Hopkins, the civil rights movement in Baltimore and in the South caused me to look at the roots of that issue in the Civil War period. Exactly a century earlier, in the 1860s, many of the same issues were being thrashed out. So I decided that I would look at the civil rights activists of a century earlier, the Abolitionists. Once

emancipation became a reality, what was their vision of the future of race relations? That became the subject of my dissertation and my first book, and from there, my interests in the whole question of slavery, the end of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction broadened out to include political and military history as well as this reform group. And I think probably my own feeling is that most people who choose history as a subject and then choose a specialization within history do so because of something in their own contemporary world that motivates their curiosity.

Hildermeier: As was very common in the mid-1960s, I began my studies in history and German literature with the aim of becoming a secondary school teacher. I started my university studies in 1966 in Bochum and was at the time primarily interested in contemporary history. When Hans Mommsen came to Bochum, I worked for him as a research assistant. In 1969, following my fifth semester of study, I changed universities, and that step played a big role. I became a historian of Eastern Europe. In the final two years of my secondary schooling, I had enrolled in an elective course, a study group in Russian. Therefore, I had been exposed somewhat to the language, so that it was not completely foreign to me. Naturally, I had to relearn it completely, but at least I had a rough idea of what I was getting into.

I ended up working with Dietrich Geyer and became involved with Russia and the Soviet Union. I think he personally had a far greater influence on me than did the scholarly aspects of the field itself. At most, the scholarly influence consisted of the fact that certain new methodologies were being tried out in connection with Russia and the Soviet Union. In the 1970s, things like revolutionary theory and imperialism theory were very popular. And it is not a complete coincidence that I wrote my dissertation about the other political party in the Russian revolution, the party that lost.

After completing my dissertation and spending time in Stanford, Moscow, and Kiev, among other places, it suddenly dawned on me that I had become a specialist for Eastern Europe, and I remained one. I became an assistant professor (*Assistent*) in Berlin at the Free University and completed my habilitation thesis in 1983 under the direction of Hans-Joachim Torke. Immediately after this, as was still possible in 1984, I accepted a temporary position in Göttingen, where I was offered a professorship in 1985, and I have remained there ever since.

2. How has historical *scholarship* changed in the last thirty years, and what do you see as the major trends for the future?

McPherson: I think the most important change in the United States in the kind of history that is written and in methodology is what we might

broadly call the rise of social history in the last generation. When I was in graduate school, I think the traditional fields of political, diplomatic, economic, and military history had to some extent the focus on the political economy of a nation and on international relations as the dominant themes. But starting in the 1960s and increasingly in the 1970s and 1980s in this country, the emphasis began to be on history from the bottom up if you will—that was one of the phrases used at the time. What were the lives of non-elites like? And that broadened out into all kinds of sub-specializations: black history and women's history, which then became gender history to some degree, and the history of the family, and the history of minority groups, groups that were at the margins of society. Now a big field in this country is gay history or queer studies as it is sometimes called. And that would have been inconceivable to me in graduate school. This would have been exotic and alien and a little bit bizarre. But now it is a normal part of historical scholarship.

One consequence of the ascent of social history was the decline of some more traditional fields, particularly diplomatic and military history, and to some degree traditional political history. It was sort of like a pair of scales. And the old-fashioned concept of history as a narrative, as a story, also declined in popularity. Like everything else, there is an action and then there is a reaction, and by the 1990s people in this country were calling for a narrative synthesis of all these new specializations because historical study had become so fragmented. Monographs on minority groups or on some kind of social history seem to have little relationship to any broader context sometimes. So you will find all kinds of articles in the journals such as the *American Historical Review* or the *Journal of American History* in the 1990s calling for narrative synthesis, for a revival of narrative. As a consequence, some of these traditional fields have made something of a comeback. But now, people working on political, military, or diplomatic history incorporate the findings of social historians. For example, somebody doing diplomatic history does not just look at one diplomat's correspondence with another diplomat, but instead also looks at the way in which social issues and public opinion and politics within the societies actually influence diplomacy. So I think in a way that has been a very healthy development in the last ten or twelve years.

Something else that happened in my own lifetime was the application of the methodologies of the social sciences, of psychology, and of various kinds of theoretical approaches to historical research. Not just Marxism, which has a long-standing kind of historical framework for interpretation, but various theories of race, class, and gender were used to try to gain some historical insight into the past. Sometimes these theories were so abstruse and maybe even marginal that it turned a lot of people off. There was a sense ten or twelve years ago that history was in a bit of a

crisis because we had lost a public audience because of this specialization and the jargon or theoretical frameworks in which a lot of historical monographs and articles were couched. And so part of this call for a narrative synthesis in the 1990s was an effort to reach out beyond the academy and beyond the professoriat and beyond specialists to reach a broader public audience because the fear was that professional historians were losing the public audience to popular historians. As a consequence, for a while the concept of popular history was a kind of stigma in the academy. If one tried to write in such a way that made one's writings accessible to a lay audience, that somehow meant you were no longer at the cutting edge of historical scholarship. So there was a feeling that this had gone too far as well, and that it was time to reach out again to that broader public audience because historians have a kind of responsibility to make their specialized knowledge available to citizens. So I think that is where we are right now. Sometimes this mission is given lip service more than substance, but I have been one of those who feel that we really do have a responsibility to speak to a larger audience.

What we now call cultural history, which is a term that has developed in the last decade or so, is a kind of blending of what we used to call social history with what used to be known as intellectual history. People who called themselves intellectual historians often focused on the development of ideas and ideologies by elites in American society. And as the focus of much historical scholarship began to broaden to look at non-elites, I think intellectual historians saw that they were in danger of becoming marginalized. They came to recognize that in fact all peoples have a culture, and that cultural history can look at all kinds of artifacts, not just written artifacts, but public festivals, holidays, and other kinds of rituals that various ethnic groups or communities might have. And so intellectual historians became cultural historians in the process of looking at non-elites.

There is a tendency in predicting the future to project forward recent developments. But earlier I also talked about the way in which any kind of action spurs a reaction. I think that some of the traditional fields have been making a bit of a comeback. Maybe that is just wishful thinking on the part of the diplomatic historians and military historians and political historians. But there is a sense that there is new life now in some of these older fields, in part because they have incorporated some of these other developments. But military history has become much less the history of commanders and strategy. It is now the impact of wars on economic and social and political developments and vice versa. Diplomatic history has broadened as well, and this is a process that is going to continue. So one future development will be that some of these traditional fields will continue to be changed by the new focus on social and cultural history that

we were talking about earlier. Something else that is likely to happen is that the continued interest in Asian history and Third World history will become permanent. History in this country is not going to be just the history of the United States and of Western Europe, as it was for the most part until the 1950s and 1960s.

Hildermeier: I began my studies at a time when historical research was dominated by political history. To a large degree, this was the history of great men and absolutely no women. At the same time, though, the 1960s saw the beginning of social history. The twentieth century was still shaped quite significantly by the work on Germany's Nazi past, and the Third Reich was a major field of research in the 1960s. Although I have been observing the shift to cultural history since the 1980s, I am and have remained primarily a social historian. I was socialized in this field and wrote my major works using this approach. If asked to make international comparisons, I would not be able to say what the major differences were. We incorporated things here since the 1970s that perhaps appeared somewhat earlier in French and Anglo-Saxon historiography. But because most developments arrived here after a delay of five to ten years, I do not have the impression that we now lag behind in any way or that there remain any major differences.

However, there was a significant difference between German and Soviet-Russian historiography. Russian historiography was not only immensely ideological—something that can almost be disregarded because we simply ignored it—but methodologically speaking, its orientation was incredibly empirical, if not to say positivist. Historiography consisted primarily of facts. And because intellectual freedom was strictly circumscribed and experimentation with new research methods was not permitted, innovation consisted of finding more material in the archives and presenting even more detailed facts. This was rather boring.

Since American research on Russia was so strong, also in terms of quantity, and because the content and especially the methodology of Soviet works proved fairly boring, research conducted in the United States played a very large role for German historians of Eastern Europe. Moreover, social history was also becoming increasingly popular in the United States starting in the 1960s.

Certainly in the 1960s and 1970s, German historiography was strongly focused on itself. German history truly was German history, and seldom looked beyond its own borders. Then German historians began to look in the direction of Anglo-Saxon history. After that, they established a second pillar of research in English and American history, but rarely in French history. Naturally, the nucleus remained German history. Eastern European studies developed because of the Cold War. Even though the Cold War has ended, we still suffer from the repercussions of, as mean

tongues put it, this strictly political genesis of the field. Yet Eastern European history, which was institutionalized to a greater degree than American history, for example, has always remained far too isolated for my taste. A true convergence with general history did not occur. In my opinion, the main reason this never happened was a simple one, namely the language barrier, rather than methodological reasons. Many people in Eastern European history perceived themselves as regional historians, just as one is a French or Spanish historian, and not as historians who pursue their study through special methodological approaches.

I am a product of my times with regard to my academic socialization. I began as a social historian and probably still think primarily in terms of social history. I am critical of some changes and approaches found in cultural history. I think the danger is great that cultural history could lead to an extraordinary dissolution of the consensus as to what constitutes history. What we are experiencing is in my view a return to subjective experience and to processes of subjective filtering of what was once thought to be halfway objective reality. If we filter everything through subjective experience and place the processes of subjective analysis in the foreground, then the unavoidable result is more subjectivity, individualization, and consequently a diminishment of central perspectives. However, this is probably what the proponents of this approach strive for. They would argue that the discovery of such diversity represents an improvement over the far too homogenized perspective associated with social history. And rightly so, in my opinion. The question is, however, how to reestablish a balance that enables us to pull everything together. That is what I see missing at the moment. I suspect that things will unfold much as they did in social history during the 1970s and 1980s and that the outcome will perhaps be a somewhat different view of core or mainstream problems and areas of historical reality. Unconventional methodological interests will become marginalized. In 1973, Wolfgang Mommsen said in his famous lecture "Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Historismus" (Historiography beyond Historicism) that social history is most effective where it links classic subjects of political history to social historical approaches. I think this is right, and can be applied analogously to cultural history.

3. How has the historical *profession* changed in the last thirty years?

McPherson: The rise of social history and the interest in the history of various minorities also reflected the changing nature of the demography of the constituency of historians. In the United States, 40 percent of history Ph.D.s now are women. That is considerably different from what it

was when I was in graduate school. There is a far greater representation of the various minorities who are becoming historians now than was the case thirty to forty years ago. And so one reason for the focus on the history of various groups in American society has been because more and more historians come from this kind of background.

Hildermeier: The significant developments that have taken place here are the increased diversity in personnel and in their respective approaches. A major expansion took place, of course, at the end of the 1960s and particularly at the beginning of the 1970s, as evidenced by the many new universities and the new subdisciplines established at them. Academic life was definitely changed in connection with this expansion. We could perhaps summarize this change by describing it as a greater orientation toward what could be called the “consumers” of education. I think that the consideration of student interests has become much greater than what I experienced during the last period of “classic” academic life in the 1950s. In the older system, research and scholarly interests, that is things not considered part of education in the narrower sense, were much more dominant than has been the case since the 1970s. The diversity in programs of study (*Studiengänge*) and the incorporation of student interests into academic planning hardly existed previously. So, if I had to name two key developments, I would say the first was the quantitative expansion of the field of history combined with a much greater differentiation than existed previously, and the second was an increased emphasis on teaching rather than research.

4. What is your organization’s relationship to the practice of history outside the universities, such as public history and the teaching of history in high schools?

McPherson: The AHA has really broadened its sense of what it is doing and what it should be doing. It has changed from focusing primarily on higher education to trying to reach out and embrace a whole range of people who are historians. It has broadened the definition of historian from the professor who gets up in front of a class and writes articles for scholarly journals and books with footnotes to include secondary school teachers, public historians, independent scholars, people in museums and historical societies, and people working in the National Park Service. I think that has been a major development, certainly from the standpoint of the AHA, which over the last couple of decades has had so-called task forces in all of these areas, and now has three divisions within it. There is the professional division and the research division, which focus on the traditional areas of academic historians, but then there is the teaching division, which really tries to reach out to this broader constituency.

There has been a task force on public history, and there have been many sessions at the annual AHA meetings that try to reach out to all of these other constituencies. I think that the broadened inclusiveness of the AHA is a pretty good barometer of the kinds of changes that have been taking place in the profession over the last three or four decades or so.

There have always been historical societies and museums with some kind of historical focus, but I think that these have become much more professionalized. The Park Service has more professionally trained historians on its staff than it did a generation or so ago. So while those institutions have always been there, they have become more professional, more visible and salient in public life. The AHA and other historical associations have been responding to that change, but also consciously trying to be more inclusive in the concept of who is a historian and to whom we should be reaching out.

The AHA is also trying to incorporate teachers of history in secondary schools and two-year colleges into the organization as far as possible. That is what the teaching division, one of the three major divisions within the AHA, is primarily concerned with. This division sponsors all kinds of conferences in various states on the teaching of history at the secondary school or community college level. While there is obviously going to be some focus on curriculum, the focus is primarily on making sure that the teachers at this level are current with the latest historical scholarship and interpretations, that they feel they are part of the profession, sustaining their morale and their sense of identity as historians.

Whenever you get involved with the high school history curriculum there is always going to be a danger of succumbing to public pressure on how history ought to be taught, for example to emphasize patriotism or triumphalism or not to be critical of American institutions as they have evolved over the generations. And I think an organization like the AHA has to be careful not to take sides in controversies like that because it would undermine the organization's influence and the sense of professional standards.

Hildermeier: Some public historians are represented through the head of regional history associations on the committee, but we do not include museum and other kinds of historians in the Historikerverband, and I do not even know whether they are nationally organized. They have not approached us, and we have never approached them, at least as long as I have been a part of this. The integration of public history takes place for the most part at the university level. Students are being trained not only for academic careers, but internships are being built into programs of study for the purpose of finding jobs for historians in a variety of fields, ranging from the media to professional organizations to museums. We have not yet addressed this issue within the Historikerverband,

and I would not know how to go about it because it is not something that can be regulated centrally. How do we integrate people? Well, the Historikerverband is open to anyone who has anything professionally to do with history broadly defined. A historian who works for a newspaper is welcome, as is someone from a museum. That is not a problem. It is the historians in the museums and in journalism who show little interest in participating in our association. I at least have not witnessed such participation; we are probably too strongly focused on the universities and academia. The Verband der Geschichtslehrer (Association of History Teachers) is a separate organization. The Historikerverband is comprised of university historians who hold positions above the academic level of university students. We do have doctoral candidates if they are regularly employed outside the universities. That is the requirement, the qualification for membership. People who are still studying cannot simply become members.

5. What are the major challenges facing your organization? In what ways does the AHA/Historikerverband address issues of graduate education and the difficult job prospects of younger historians?

McPherson: One of the biggest challenges for the AHA is professional opportunities for young historians, whether they are academic opportunities or other opportunities for either Ph.D.s or M.A.s. The AHA report on graduate education in history that is just about to come out is on Ph.D. training, but the AHA is now embarking on a second project on masters degrees, to be completed in two years. Regarding Ph.D. training: Here are people who spend five or six years and a lot of money to become highly trained professional historians. What is their career going to be like after that? How can we prepare them for that career? If they are going into teaching, how can we prepare them to be better teachers? That is another challenge. Ph.D. training focuses on research, but everybody complains that Ph.D.s come out without knowing very much about how to teach.

One of the problems is that those of us at research universities basically try to clone ourselves in our graduate students, and if somehow these students do not get a good job—at least at a good four-year college or university—then somehow we believe they have failed. This report by the AHA is an effort to begin to change that culture.

If you look at the data on the number of history Ph.D.s produced in the United States, it peaked in the early 1970s, and only now is again approaching that peak. The first crisis actually happened in the 1970s, and the biggest cutbacks in graduate admissions, and therefore a few years later in the number of Ph.D.s, did in fact occur then. There have

been fluctuations since then, but in 1989 the Mellon Foundation came out with a report that there would be a shortage of the supply of new Ph.D.s in the humanities and social sciences by the mid-1990s because of retirements of the generation that came into the profession in the 1960s. This report was produced by economists, and it turned out to be wrong, because it did not take into account the cutbacks because of the recession in the early 1990s. So graduate schools in history and in other disciplines increased admissions in the early 1990s partly as a consequence of that report, and the number of people who were then coming out in the mid-1990s looking for jobs increased. But the number of jobs had shrunk because of the cutbacks in the early 1990s as a result of the recession.

I think the same thing may be occurring again now. There is always a two- to three-year lag between an economic recession in this country and the cutbacks, mostly at the state universities, and we are seeing that happening right now. So over the long term, I think the profession, the AHA and other professional organizations, and graduate programs need to avoid the temptation to increase the number of students in response to things like the Mellon report until the trends become a little bit clearer. So on the supply end, I think that graduate programs need to be responsible. On the demand end, I am not sure what can be done. One of the things in which the AHA has been increasingly involved in recent years is called advocacy. This is a genteel term for lobbying. The main offices of the AHA are here in Washington. And one of the paid staff of the AHA is the head of something called the National Coalition for History. Bruce Craig is his name, and then there is Arnita Jones, who is the executive secretary of the AHA. They spend a lot of their time on the Hill, talking to congressmen. There is a close relationship with Robert Byrd, who has been the champion in Congress appropriating money for improving high school history programs, for example, and for more appropriations for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and for the National Historical Publications Commission. This commission gives money to projects like the Thomas Jefferson papers, the Benjamin Franklin papers, and the Woodrow Wilson papers. And the NEH of course funds a lot of historical programs. So one of the things that the AHA has done and can do is to advocate public support of history in Congress. Then of course at the state level, all states have state humanities foundations, so members of the AHA and especially members of the council and professional and research divisions in the AHA who live in many different states can get involved there.

The AHA has also tried to address the working conditions of adjunct professors. The AHA is not an accrediting organization and so we cannot say to college B or university C that we deny you accreditation because you do not treat your adjunct faculty well, or you have too many adjunct

faculty in relationship to your full-time tenure track faculty. But we can publicize what we call “best practices” in various levels of historical practice. Adjunct teaching is one example of that, and two years ago, the AHA and the Organization of American Historians formed a joint committee on adjunct and part-time employment in colleges, and just this past spring, both organizations adopted a resolution spelling out best practices or standards that we hope universities and colleges that use adjunct faculty can measure up to in terms of salary, working conditions, fringe benefits, and so on. The most the AHA can do is to publicize standards that we would like to see institutions measure up to in what they do about history, whether it is education in a university setting or education in the setting of a museum or of a public facility of some kind.

Hildermeier: Our central task and the main focus of activity of the committee is the organization of the *Historikertag*, the biennial history congress. Our funds are basically an emergency fund from which to pay for the *Historikertag* ourselves should no other sources of financial support be found. Nowadays such an event costs between €300,000 and €350,000. This has become a mass event with 3,000 to 3,500 people attending. We might say the *Historikertag* is the classic function for an academic, professional organization in the sense that it represents and documents as much as possible that which is occurring in the entire field, from ancient history to Eastern European history. This is the main purpose of our activity.

However, I also see that there is an increasing need to engage in lobbying. This will require another type of structure, specifically a thoroughly different type of attitude, in short “professionalization.” How much energy we should put into this is something about which I myself am unsure, particularly since we have the problem that we are a national organization, but policy in this field is primarily made by the states (*Länder*), and it is not so easy to coordinate the two.

Naturally, we wish publicly to represent the field of history as a professional organization, especially when it comes to legislative proposals like those introduced in recent years, including the rule limiting temporary university positions to twelve years. And we have done this already. We write letters, and our letters are usually answered, but our influence is very limited. We do not have mass support—we are not a trade union and we actually see ourselves not as a lobby but as a professional organization that represents historians’ interests in a broad sense.

The pressure to adopt American programs of study is creating a new set of problems for German higher education. The German and American systems are not comparable, and that will perhaps never be completely understood by Edelgard Bulmahn, the Minister of Education and Re-

search, and others. You cannot simply import and transplant certain aspects; you must also transplant the entire foundation of the system. Now we have junior professorships, which are emulations of assistant professorships, but normally junior professors will not be granted tenure because this would be too expensive. This does not make sense. The junior professors are swamped with many more responsibilities and lose the protection of the 50 percent research time that they had as holders of C1 positions; they are qualified to apply for funding through the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation) and other foundations, but are also compelled to do so; and they must take part in all examinations and participate in academic self-administration, which can be very time-consuming. Then, as a “thank you” for the job they have done, they will be dismissed after six years. There is a consensus within the executive committee of the Historikerverband, including the two representatives of younger historians, that the adoption of these measures is neither fish nor fowl, particularly if the aim is to guarantee scholars prospects for the future and security at an earlier age. It is necessary to take it one step further and to create tenure-track positions. Otherwise, all we have actually done is continue the limited-term positions while simultaneously piling more responsibilities on those who are only appointed for six years.

If B.A. and M.A. programs are going to be created out of *Magister* without truly revamping the programs as is being proposed throughout the *Länder*, then this is often nothing more than false labeling, and cannot work. And if this becomes the case in all of the *Länder*, then we will take a position on it. It remains to be seen how successful we would be in coming up with a position that enjoys unanimous support because, of course, we are not all necessarily of the same opinion. In light of this difficulty, we have been careful to withhold commentary so far, though I am not sure that will be possible for much longer. If not, it would mean distancing ourselves significantly from the current self-image and function of an academic professional organization. At the moment, everything is open and not at all simple.

With regard to the gathering of statistical data on the emerging generation of scholars, we have not progressed beyond the maintenance of an old card file of *Privatdozenten* (scholars who have passed the *Habilitation*) because we have seen that it does not work on a centralized, nationwide level. We have very few opportunities to make an impact as is, and would have no such opportunity within the *Länder*, I think, because this is the responsibility of each university. So, one cannot influence the opportunities for young scholars at all at such a level. We have been able to achieve something by way of a simple survey. Young historians proposed it at the Historikertag held in Aachen, and the proposal was gladly taken

up. We financed a survey, which found that job market chances vary considerably among the different historical fields. We knew that already, but it is nice to have this empirically documented. For example, for every *Privatdozent*, there are so and so many positions. For nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians, the situation looks rather bleak. It seems the more marginal the field, such as Eastern European history, the more favorable the chances of finding a job. We have not taken the initiative to do more than this survey; quite honestly, we did not know what we should do. It makes no sense to write letters to the responsible Ministers for Education and Science of the *Länder*. One would have to be represented in the universities, in the senates, in the really decisive planning and budgetary commissions of the universities. This is where it is possible to shape policy if one has not already done this at the party or government level.

This is also a problem of resources because all of this means additional voluntary work. We have a hard time finding people who will commit themselves to such work. The Historikerverband has no permanent positions, only part-time jobs to assist the chair, the treasurer, and the secretary. I have no idea how we could finance increased services on a permanent basis with our resources. But I do not think that it would work. To assume all of these functions, we would need a central office. But such an office would then eat up our budget.

What it boils down to is that we must make a decision. Do we wish to remain a professional organization that works to make the public aware of the problems facing academic history and historians and that sponsors the Historikertag as a showcase for what historians do? Or do we want to undertake a major effort to professionalize this organization for the purpose of doing more and more lobbying? This is an open question.

6. What role should the AHA/ Historikerverband and individual historians play in politics and society?

McPherson: When there is a major issue that might involve historians, the president of the AHA or other historians who might be prominent in the AHA are sometimes called on by the media for comment. When that happens, other presidents and I have made it clear that even though we might at the moment be president of the AHA, we do not feel that we can speak for the AHA. It is an organization of 14,000 members with a whole range of viewpoints, so that what speaks for the AHA I think are decisions by the council or by the membership at its annual meeting. This rarely happens; few members attend the business meetings of the AHA, so it is really the council that may pass a resolution on some public issue

and get it publicized. But for the most part the professional associations like the AHA are very chary of stepping into public controversies.

My president's column in the September 2003 of the AHA *Perspectives* was a critique of the Bush administration's policy. The handle I used there was Condoleezza Rice's comment about revisionist history. But I got a lot of flak for doing that. In the October 2003 issue you can see three letters from members of the AHA saying in effect that the president of the AHA ought not to be out there writing an op-ed piece like Paul Krugman or William Safire. I responded in the November 2003 issue saying that I do not see these columns as speaking for the AHA, they are speaking for me. So I think it is a ticklish issue about the degree to which a professional association ought to get officially involved in public issues that are not directly connected with professional standards for historians.

Where there is clearly a professional issue, such as making historical records available for qualified researchers, the AHA has been very active. We have for instance joined with the National Coalition for History and with several other organizations as parties to a lawsuit to try to get the administration to change its declassification policy.

As far as individual historians are concerned, I think that historians do have a responsibility to try to be public intellectuals. We historians presumably have a field of expertise that often has relevance to public issues in the country. I think historians have a responsibility to speak out on those issues, even if two historians will articulate diametrically opposed positions. The reason this does not happen more may not be so much a reluctance on the part of historians themselves to speak out as it is a reluctance on the part of the media to call on or accept historians. Americans probably have less of a historical consciousness than Europeans. We are more oriented toward the present and the future, the immediate rather than the long-term.

Hildermeier: We do make an effort to be a part of all public discussions that affect the historical profession. We do this less by constantly writing the Ministers of Education and Science and more by writing letters to the press. I consider this very important, and the events of the past two years prove my point. In his capacity as a member of the Wissenschaftsrat, Ulrich Herbert set off a debate in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* regarding the twelve-year limit. Subsequently, we took a position. I wrote something and so did others. As this example illustrates, this debate was conducted almost exclusively by historians. I think we have to intensify this effort. These are issues of scientific and academic policy. With regard to general societal issues, we cannot speak with a singular voice and certainly not in the name of the association.

I think academic life, including the humanities—at least the field of history—still enjoys a much greater measure of prestige and social stand-

ing in Germany than it does in the United States, which has always been much more strongly commercialized. In Germany we still find traces of a culture deriving from nineteenth-century bourgeois society. This is, so to speak, the *ZEIT* readership of the 1960s and 1970s: people interested in taking part in public debate and in shaping public opinion. This is comparable to France, where this element is even more obvious, where this intellectual culture, the *hommes-de-lettres* culture, still thrives. Here the deviant case is the United States, which was very commercially oriented from the beginning.