

**Historikertag 2004: Ein Blick vom Übermeer. The 45th
Historikertag as experienced by a non-European
von Patrick J. Geary**

Schleswig-Holstein is an excellent location from which begin to consider space and communication in history. This region of flat, irregular bits of land that mix easily with vast expanses of water has no natural boundaries and has required human intervention to turn it into Raum, that is, into socially and culturally defined space. A good place from which to begin to observe this process is the Danewerk, that long earthen wall that once cut across the peninsula, erected in the ninth century when Danes had good reason to fear their expansive and aggressive Frankish neighbor to the south. From the ninth century forward, this featureless landscape was a vital node of communication and trade across the peninsula to connect the Baltic and the Atlantic, just as the bays, fiords, and inlets provided settlements that from the age of the Vikings through the Hansa, through the Cold War, connected the Slavic world to the Germanic to the Scandinavian. The Danewerk, like other attempts to bound this space that followed across almost two millennia to establish the „natural boundaries“ of Denmark and Germany remained illusive, and in her elegant and intelligent opening remarks Ministerpräsidentin Heide Simonis evoked the oft-told statement of Lord Palmerston that only three people had ever understood the Schleswig-Holstein situation: Prince Albert, who was dead, a professor, who was insane, and himself, who had forgotten it. Thus when two thousand historians gathered in Kiel for the 45th *Historikertag*, in a rare display of academic discipline, a considerable number of sections actually addressed, and addressed well, the themes of the conference, Space and Communication, and did so with specific attention to what is often termed the „Northern Mediterranean“ and thus Germany and its northern and eastern neighbors.

But of course there were other items on the agenda, as there always are at the *Historikertag*. The purpose of these biannual assemblies requires no less. The *Historikertag* is more than the meeting of a

professional association. It provides a formal occasion for Germany to focus for a week on the discipline of history as practiced in universities and institutes in order to take stock of the role of history in German society. To the amazement of an American, the German media does just this. In the US, the annual American Historical Association meeting in the first week of January is almost entirely ignored by the press and the wider public. At most, a reporter will thumb through the program and select the titles of a few particularly bizarre papers titles to hold up to ridicule as evidence of how trivial history has become. („Buggery in the nineteenth century British Navy“ was one that a journalist singled out a few years ago.) Ours is a society populated by citizens and lead by politicians who for the most part want to believe that the past is irrelevant to the present or the future. They are of course repeatedly proven wrong, but since recognizing this would itself require some sense of history, the lesson continues to go unlearned. Not so in Germany, where the local and even national press gave large and detailed discussions of the conference in the wider context of the state of the historical discipline in Germany today.

Of course, journalism being what it is, there was a natural tendency to look for crises, conflicts, scandals, and the like: Controversy sells newspapers. Thus in the first article to appear on *Historikertag* in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* Frank Ebbinghaus, eager for some controversy, allowed himself to be misinformed by someone within the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft to write an interesting but somewhat distorted account of the disaster that the search for the two directors of the MPIfG has become. Political spin can come from informants as well as from journalists.

However Ebbinghaus did recognize that part of the MPG's mess is that it is attempting to solve its problems on the cheap. This tendency is not limited to research institutes. If there is a more general crisis facing the historical profession in Germany, it is not the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft's mismanagement of the succession in Göttingen but the much wider and deeper crisis in the funding of humanities

research and instruction generally in Germany. This crisis, underscored by the announced decision of the University of Hamburg to slash its humanities instruction by roughly 50% and to eliminate over a dozen professional chairs, was not only the topic of discussion at a special section of the *Historikertag* itself, but very much part of the discussions in the hallways, book exhibitions, and restaurants around the University of Kiel. Caught in the continuing financial crisis that affects the German economy as a whole, the needs to transform higher education in accord with the Bologna Accords, and a growing belief that technical training without a humanistic education will solve Germany's problems (A very „American“ attitude in a country that at times glories in anti-Americanism), Länder seem ready to take the cheap road to university reform.

But what of the *Historikertag* itself? Much was familiar to an habitué of the American Historical Association's conventions: a few public sessions; numerous smaller sections with varying levels of attendance and quality; a fair amount of professional gossip; and everywhere young and not-so-young historians greeting each other and looking eagerly for the „Grosse Tiere“ for whom the crowd parted like the Red Sea as they strode through the corridors. Also familiar were book exhibitors and editors offering their wares and huddling with authors either to squeeze out of them long-overdue volumes or else to try to sell them on future projects, even while dodging wantabe authors they have no intention of ever publishing.

Also familiar, but apparently for the *Historikertag* a real innovation, was the attention to secondary school education. The American Historical Association has long had a serious commitment to secondary school teachers and while sections at the convention do not directly address high school students, considerable attention is given to professional and substantive issues in teaching history in secondary school. The Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands has apparently recognized the importance of secondary school education: if history is not well and attractively taught in Gymnasia, there will

be no students willing to study it in universities. I was impressed that senior scholars such as Hanna Vollrath were ready to take the lead in building these bridges.

Blessedly missing from the *Historikertag* was the most striking and depressing aspect of the American Historical Association's Convention: the slave market. The real purpose of the AHA is buying and selling historians: virtually every university and college with an opening in history (and there are hundreds every year) uses the Convention as a convenient moment to interview as many as fifteen potential candidates for every post, only three of whom will be invited to the institute itself for the eagerly sought-after „on-campus“ interview. Most of these preliminary interviews take place in hotel rooms or, if the institution can afford to follow the Association's guidelines, in a hotel suite, so that young candidates do not have to confront half drunken committees across unmade beds. Four or five bored and exhausted members of search committees see one candidate after the other in thirty minute intervals, while hundreds of eager un- or under-employed historians stand in the hall waiting their turn or wander the convention looking for a last-minute posting for a part time position. The *Historikertag* was blessedly free of such things, the closest thing being the traditional session „Junge Historiker stellen sich vor,“ which, while still something of a slave auction, is at least a more tasteful one.

The sessions themselves, or at least those that this medievalist attended, seemed more disciplined than the average at the American Historical Convention. As is ever the case, most attention was directed to Contemporary History, with Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and even the Early Modern periods receiving relatively little play. This is only normal: we pre-modern historians are accustomed to this minority status and expect nothing better. For the most part, speakers actually addressed the broad themes of space and communication, usually in case-studies drawn from real knowledge rather than in generalities thrown together to meet the program committee's requirements. I cannot pretend that I heard any presentations that were epoch-making

breakthroughs, but what I heard was competent, intelligent, and well presented.

If the quality of the presentations was above the American average, the breadth of the spaces and communication systems seemed somewhat provincial. True, the Baltic states of Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia were well represented and signaled out as „Partner States“ in the program, and a good number of foreign historians from Europe and beyond were integrated throughout. More disquieting was a certain narrowness of geographical focus. While German industry may look to global markets, to judge from the *Historikertag* the same cannot apparently be said of German historical culture. Thus the overwhelming majority of sections concentrated on Germany and German relations with its near neighbors, especially with Eastern and, to a lesser extent Western Europe. Asian history, African history, and Latin America were all but absent from the *Historikertag*, just as they tend to be from historische Seminaren in German Universities. The „ghettoization“ of non-European history in ahistorical area studies and philological faculties seems alive and well in Germany, with a resulting dearth of professional historians who can speak with real expertise to deep pasts of contemporary world issues. Germany may have no aspirations to becoming a world power and may cringe at the dangers of globalization. However the historical profession owes to the nation (and the nation needs to finance) historians who can provide a better understanding of a world that is much larger, and much more dangerous, than the shores of the Baltic Sea.

Patrick J. Geary is professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles. His research interests are Medieval culture and society, 500-1200. Homepage: <http://www.history.ucla.edu/geary/>