



# Viewed Historically

The e-Newsletter of the Department of History  
Volume 2, Nr. 2, February 2007

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## In This Issue

### From Winter to Spring

As I write these lines, the unusually cold, snowy and icy winter we have been experiencing this year is giving way to warmer weather. For the moment, mud and slush are everywhere, but an optimist might begin to perceive the very first hints of spring. The transition from winter to spring is typical of the second semester of the academic year, and leads to some confusion about whether to call it the winter or spring semester. At MU, it has always been officially the winter semester, although starting next year, as part of the introduction of a new student registration and information system, it is going to be renamed the spring semester. The Registrar's office, for some reason, is very excited about this name change.

Call it what you wish, we are past the halfway point in the academic year, and can now say a little bit about the way things have been working out. Total enrollment for all history classes in both semesters this year came out to 6,698 students, just short of 7,000 students and also just short of last year's record, but the second most the department has ever had. One of the reasons our enrollments did not match past levels is that the number of history professors is now fewer than in past years, so that a number of students looking to take history classes have had to be turned away. As mentioned in the last issue of the newsletter, we were looking to hire three new colleagues this year, to fill gaps in our course offerings and to offer more students the opportunity to take history classes. I am pleased to report that our searches have been successful, and we have hired three excellent young scholars to teach South Asian, U.S. women's and European

intellectual and cultural history. The November 2007 issue will feature these new colleagues; in the meantime, you can look at the brief notices about them posted on the history department home page (<http://history.missouri.edu>).

February is the month in which the history department recognizes its very best undergraduate majors, those students who are receiving departmental scholarships are doing history internships or writing B.A. honors theses. Our recognition ceremony was held on Valentine's Day this year, and, as is appropriate for the day, it was a tribute to those students who light up our lives, who take very seriously the study of the past and whose commitment, energy and interest make them a pleasure to teach. You can [click here](#), for the ceremony brochure and some photographs from the event.

As promised in the last issue, our news section focuses this time on Professor Mark Smith, the history department's latest curators' professor of history.

Professor Smith offers a short essay, in which he explains the nature and significance of his scholarship.

The historical reflections section deals with a characteristic event that kicks off the winter (or spring) semester for historians, the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, held each year the first weekend in January. After attending this year's meeting, I thought about the differences and similarities between it and the parallel one

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held by German historians, which I attended a decade ago. Comparing the two meetings tells us something about the different place of academic historians and the study of history in the two countries.

We will be back with our annual book issue, at the end of April. In the meantime, to get in touch, to send news of yourself and your accomplishments, as well as changes of e-mail address and any other such details contact the history department's administrator, Ms. [Melinda Lockwood](#). Suggestions about new features, possible improvements, and comments on the newsletter more generally can be sent to the history department chair, [Jonathan Sperber](#). You can always see the latest on the history department's web site <http://history.missouri.edu> and send comments on it, to the departmental webmaster, Professor [Jeff Pasley](#).

Jonathan Sperber  
Chair, Department of History

Considering making a donation to the history department? For information on doing so, click on this [link](#). The department chair and the development office of the College of Arts and Sciences will be pleased to discuss with you any plans you may have to help the department of history.

## Mark Smith on His Scholarship

Imagine looking at a book with a bright blue cover. "Where's the blue?" I ask. You respond, "in the book"--or, to be more precise, on its cover. Intuitively obvious though it may be, this answer is flat wrong according to modern theory. What's actually "on" the cover is a structure that reflects a specific wavelength of light and absorbs the rest. When it reaches your retina, that wavelength causes an electro-chemical response that's transmitted through a complex neural system to the visual cortex at the rear of the brain. This in turn arouses the perception of blueness. The blue you see, in short, is entirely in your head. Cause (wavelength) and effect (the perception of blue) are totally different in kind.

What about the wavelength itself; what's it in? Common experience tells us waves are formed in things like air or water, which provide the physical media for their propagation. Since the late nineteenth century, however, the existence of such a medium (called ether) has lost all credibility. But perhaps the wavelength is in the light shining on the book. The problem here is twofold. First, there is no such thing as light, at least not in the elemental sense. What we take as pure, white light is simply the aggregate of all wavelengths that stimulate color-sensations across the visible spectrum. Second, however we construe it, light does not always act as if it consists of waves. Sometimes it acts as if were composed of discrete particles called photons. Worse yet, under certain experimental conditions, it acts in ways that make no sense whatever according to our common understanding of wave and particle motion.

How have we reached this current pass, where all our basic, intuitive notions about light and sight prove to be so misleading and false? In great part, the answer lies in how the science of optics developed between roughly 300 B.C. and the present. During the first 1900 years of that development, the primary purpose of optics was to explain sight, not light (the very term "optics" comes from the Greek word *ops*, which means "eye"). Not until the eleventh century, in fact, did light, as we think of it, become a subject of optical analysis at all, and even then it was considered only in its role as an agent of visual perception. Light-theory was thus totally subordinate to visual theory, and it remained so until the early seventeenth

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century, when the science of optics underwent a radical shift in analytic focus away from sight to the physics of light. As a result, light-theory and visual theory underwent a rather sudden and messy divorce, which ultimately led to the modern science of physical optics with all its puzzling aspects. My research in the history of optics has thus been guided by the effort to understand not only why and how this divorce occurred, but also how it has affected the way we currently think about physical reality and our mental connection to it.

## Historical Reflections

### After the Conference

As I was attending the annual meeting of the American Historical Association (or AHA), at the beginning of January, held this year in Atlanta, I got to thinking about another annual historians' conference I had attended ten years previously. This was the biennial meeting of German historians, the *Deutscher Historikertag*. The one I attended was held in Munich at the end of September 1996, concluding the day before *Oktoberfest* began. A comparison of these two conferences tells us a lot about the different ways of being a historian and the state of the historical profession in the United States and in Germany.

One very apparent difference was the official public greeting the German historians received. At the introductory plenary session, they were addressed by the mayor of Munich, the prime minister of Bavaria and the president of Germany. The equivalent in Atlanta would have been that city's mayor, the governor of Georgia and the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Needless to say, none of those prominent figures was on hand. In fact, the only interaction the historians had with the public authorities was when one historian was arrested for jaywalking, knocked by the police to the ground, cuffed, taken to jail and booked. You can read about that incident in the [convention report of the History News Network](#) (scroll down to Day 3), in general a handy source of news about the historical profession.

So we can say that the study and practice of history in Germany enjoys a good deal more official public recognition and esteem than is the case in the United States. Germany's serious press, such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *New York Times* of Germany (although its politics are closer to those of the *Wall Street Journal*) has lengthy serious coverage of the *Historikertag*, while press reports of any kind on the American Historical Association meetings are few and far between—and often seem designed primarily to make fun of it. Professors generally have a higher social prestige in Europe in general and Germany and particular than in this country, although the special attention that historians receive is a bit distinct. Prominent political figures generally do not attend the professional association meetings of, say, German sociologists or mathematicians. This special treatment for historians might reflect the prominent role historians and historical themes played in the process of national unification in nineteenth century Germany, so that leading figures in today's German nation-state still give at least lip-service to the importance of the study of history.

There are features of the AHA, though, that do not exist in its German counterpart. The American historians' conference, for instance, is the scene of a publishing market. The major conference hotel has an enormous publishers' exhibit, and the room is packed full of historians talking to publishers' representatives about ordering books for their courses, or trying to convince them into considering their book manuscripts. If you look carefully in fancy restaurants around the convention, you will see editors wining and dining historians, attempting to sign them to a contract to write a textbook, which they hope will make a lot of money for both sides. American historians may not have a lot of public esteem or recognition by the state, and they are certainly not seen as representing the nation, but they do get to be entrepreneurial and make deals.

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This capitalist side of American life is reflected in another market in full bloom at the AHA, the job market. It seems like most of the people attending the conference are looking to be hired for a job as a historian, or looking to hire someone. Interviews are constantly going on in hotel suites, in the officially designated interviewing area (known to those involved as “the pit”) or in hotel lobbies. Several of us from Mizzou spent most of our time interviewing applicants for the department’s position in European intellectual and cultural history. A number of the department’s new Ph.D.s, or students expecting to finish their degrees in the near future were present as well, trying their luck in the job market. There is no such job market at the meetings of German historians; just an early evening session called “Young historians present themselves,” at which German academics in their early 40s (which is the age of a typical “young” historian there) offer a summary of their research in the generally vain hope that someone might consider hiring them.

So we can say that historians, and academics in general, enjoy public recognition in Germany and are closely tied to the state, while their American counterparts have less honor but more opportunities to wheel and deal, in the hope of making money. This might reflect broader features of public life in the two countries—more state-oriented and government-regulated in Germany, more market-oriented and freewheeling in the US. There is another way that the two meetings differ, which says something about the different position of historians in the two countries.

I was at the *Deutscher Historikertag* because I had been invited to give a paper on a panel with four other historians. To my astonishment, at our session, which was on a fairly obscure topic in nineteenth century history, there was an enormous crowd of some 300 spectators. At the AHA, a typical session attracts 15-20 spectators, maybe 50 at most. Larger sessions are a rarity and involve special topics of broader interest, or the appearance of academic superstars.

There’s a reason for this distinction: most of the people taking part in the *Historikertag* are not history professors or graduate students, but secondary school history teachers, working at a *Gymnasium* or college preparatory secondary school. After I gave my paper, one of the audience members came up to me and explained that he taught school in his hometown, a place that I had mentioned in my paper. Since he was interested in his town’s history, he asked if could I send him a copy of the paper. Such a scene would be very unlikely at an AHA meeting, as the participants are almost all connected with colleges and universities. The leadership of the American Historical Association has been making a big effort for years to get more high school teachers and pupils involved in the association and its annual meetings, but without very much in the way of success. Since, all too often, it’s the football coach who teaches high school history classes, this might not be entirely a surprise.

To be honest, I envied German professors’ connections with secondary school teachers and the broader public participation in their meeting. There’s a lot of interest in the past in the United States but university historians often have trouble connecting to a broader public, whether in the form of high-school teachers and pupils or just people more generally who are interested in the past. Trying to establish such a connection is part of why the history department puts out its newsletter.

Jonathan Sperber



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