

Professorial Voice

Prof. Dr. Alfred Hornung
Mainz, Germany

aspeers: Good afternoon, Professor Hornung. We want to start out with a question students often wonder about: What is it that is so fascinating about working in academics? We would be very interested in knowing how and when you decided to become a professor of American studies.

Hornung: I think I was always interested in the United States. However, when I started as a student in Germany, there was little occasion to research American literature since English departments, at the time, wanted to be more in the field of British literature rather than American. Our library had only a very small section on American literature, which we always deplored. So, when the first opportunity arose to apply for a scholarship to study in the United States, I did that and was lucky to get in.

aspeers: How did your experience abroad influence your decision to stay in the field of American studies?

Hornung: When I went on an exchange as an undergraduate to Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT, I could really work in the field of American literature. One of my teachers was Ihab Hassan, who really fostered my interest in American literature and culture. That was when I determined to spend my life doing work in this particular area. I did not know at the time whether this would be as a professor, but I knew that I wanted to continue working in this area.

aspeers: Why did you then decide to focus on American studies as a field, as opposed to literary or cultural studies proper?

Hornung: I think this happened in the course of working on my dissertation which dealt with the muckraking movement in the beginning of the twentieth century. This movement includes and incorporates many different kinds of texts, ranging from socialistic novels, such as *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, to journal articles, critical essays,



Late work or early rise?

Hornung: Both, actually. I have to get up early because our son goes to school.

Newspaper or web site?

Hornung: Web site.

Poetry or prose?

Hornung: Prose.

Book or journal?

Hornung: Books.

City or Countryside?

Hornung: City.

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and newspaper reports, covering the wide range of activities in which people can voice and express their dissent with certain aspects of American politics. Subsequently, this variety of texts necessitated a wider conception of American literature and culture than the narrow approach usually implies. At this point, I discovered the advantage of American studies as an interdisciplinary subject. I went to the stockyards in Chicago to conduct on-site research and to libraries searching for documents and material. Ultimately, it was a combination of doing empirical research and interpretations, and, afterwards, I tried to come up with some kind of theory, for which I needed different disciplines, such as linguistics, literature, cultural studies, hermeneutics, sociology, and so on.

aspeers: Do you recall your most influential experience in your academic career?

Hornung: There were some, but I think the most significant one, in terms of my later career, was my fellowship at the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle Park, NC. It is a research center which assembles about forty fellows, twenty young scholars and twenty very well-known researchers and critics in the wide range of the humanities. One of the benefits was that the participants were supposed to have lunch together in order to socialize in a casual atmosphere. I met many very important people there, such as the philosopher Paul Ricœur, the historian Bill Leuchtenburg, and the New Critic Cleanth Brooks, who was my office neighbor. This was also where I met Steven Marcus, chair of the department of English at Columbia University in New York, who invited me to be a guest professor at Columbia University and, later, even offered me a tenured position. Professionally, this was most productive, not only in terms of affiliation with people who could help you along, but more importantly, it was also a practice in interdisciplinary research with many scholars on site whom you usually read only in journals, but suddenly you had your footnotes in front of you.

aspeers: Do you see opportunities of such informal exchange at German universities?

Hornung: This seems to be difficult on many accounts. First of all, German universities rarely provide space for this kind of interchange. My university now does not even have a faculty club where you can have dinner with colleagues, students, and other members of the academic community. The great advantage of American campuses is that you have plenty of room for all these people to meet, formally or informally. Secondly, in Germany, most colleagues conceive of the university as the place you work from nine to five, thus socializing with colleagues is on a very low mark. In comparison, Americans have always had more of an interest in informal meetings and believe many opportunities arise that usually, in formal contexts, would not.

aspeers: As an advanced scholar, do you have any advice for young students of American studies?

Hornung: Yes, I think it is very important to simply be open to all new possibilities. I always tell my students, especially when they go abroad, to work hard and play hard. This is the attitude of most American students on campuses—they work hard and, in the evenings and on weekends particularly, they also enjoy themselves. That is a good balance between studying and leisure time. For young students it is especially important to recognize that American studies is a wide field full of possibilities that they should simply take. For instance, I just spent the last two days in Göttingen, reviewing a project called Popular Seriality, where scholars are developing new theories and interests around teaching superhero comics, quality TV shows, and so on. This is a topic that would have been unimaginable ten or fifteen years ago. All of a sudden, this is now possible. Consequently, young people in the field will realize that the employment opportunities also maximize. The more chances students have to go into different directions, the more research fields and job venues will open up later on.

aspeers: As you are one of the most prominent scholars of transnational American studies, how did you perceive the so-called transnational turn?

Hornung: I think this is a phenomenon that developed in the 1990s. From the point of view of Europeans and non-Americans, internationalizing American studies meant to get on equal footing with American colleagues. It demonstrated that what is done outside of the United States is similarly valid for the advancement of the field and actually has something to contribute that American colleagues are not aware of. On this basis, we developed a more transnational cooperation of Americanists with the understanding that the geographical boundaries of the United States are not the boundaries of American studies. Rather, American studies needs to be researched and take place wherever and whenever the influence of, for example, American literature, culture, politics, or economics is felt.

aspeers: Did you encounter any of these American influences during your own international experiences?

Hornung: Yes. For instance, last year I spent about eight months at Peking University in Beijing, China, teaching American studies from this transnational point of view, which would have been less possible with earlier concepts. While I was there, I discovered the formations and exfoliations of American postmodernism in contemporary Chinese culture. Apparently, there are a number of cliché images of Mao as a postmodern figure, which I had never seen before. He is represented by Chinese artists as the Statue of Liberty—Mao holding up the candle, with the corona on top. Also, the whole city of Beijing resembles, in many aspects, a very postmodern kind of architecture. So, this kind of transnational phenomenon of American culture is a topic that will widen the field, allowing more people worldwide to participate in it.

aspeers: How can students get into this kind of a transnational spirit?

Hornung: Once students start studying abroad, they get another perspective of the world and see the way in which American culture affects their own lives. At this point of time, especially during the last couple of years, Barack Obama's campaign and his success were impulses that rejuvenated and regenerated the field.

aspeers: In what way are these impulses playing out in the field?

Hornung: I think many young people are interested in the United States as a country that can continually renew itself and change old conventional patterns of practicing politics and engaging people in the political process. For example, with the 2008 election, American society was changed in that African Americans, all of a sudden, had a completely different position in and a new evaluation of the constitution of American society. On the other hand, the whole campaign mobilized and energized the young generation and profited from the particular skills of young people to communicate by text messages or Twitter. Seeing how these groups become important for the change of a whole political process should, in fact, be very exciting for them. I think these lived experiences of the vitality of American politics and culture are something that young people, and young scholars particularly, must be interested in.

aspeers: Now we would like to get a little more insight into your research activities. If we are not mistaken, your current work focuses on life writing. What is it that you are interested in and why is it so fascinating to you?

Hornung: My interest in life writing has been in the making for fifteen, twenty years. At one time, I discovered that I was very interested in narratology and all kinds of narrative structures. I thought that autobiographies would be very interesting from the point of view of narrative structures and features, but also in the sense of seeing life writing and the narrating of the life as a sort of a second nature. This is what Benjamin Franklin says in his autobiography. Writing your life is like reliving it. It is the very connection between the actual experience of life and putting it into text—a written one, a graphic novel, or some other kind of visual representation. This is not restricted to one area in the evolution of American culture, but something that you can study almost at anytime. Furthermore, life writing has always been an important topic for people who are on the margin of society and people who do not have a voice in the official mainstream. Particularly ethnic and female writers are the ones who use life writing very vigorously as a way to present their voices and to write themselves into culture.

aspeers: Since you mentioned that new forms of communication influenced the 2008 presidential campaign, do you perceive any similar influences on life writing?

Hornung: Well, if you look at the latest developments in life writing today, there are e-catalogs, e-writing, and blogs on the Internet. All of these have also been used quite extensively by soldiers in the war in Iraq as a means of informal communication in order to cope with their often intolerable experiences. Although the soldiers are usually volunteers, the pain and the fatigue somehow wear them down. Therefore, they can find sustenance in engaging in life writing. All of this is continuous, never static, changes constantly, and, in this respect, is a very democratic form of writing because it allows everybody to do it. In the past, autobiography was restricted to 'important' people, but now it has become a genre for everybody.

aspeers: If the genre is open to everybody, how do you go about teaching courses on life writing?

Hornung: Whenever I teach life writing courses, I also engage my students in writing their own lives creatively. This is something that Americans do, too, in the classroom: They give their students much more space to reflect on their own situation and see how they fit into the context of scholarship. Therefore, I think this strategy is useful for them in order to account for their own life and to reflect from time to time. Another aspect of this genre which I find interesting to teach is that we no longer consider life writing as something that authors do at the end of their lives, looking back at a number of years and trying to sort it into a continuous narrative, which often turns into an illusion. Rather, what we have learned from minority writers particularly is that they prefer so-called serial autobiographies: They write their lives in installments so that, at any point in their lives, they can sit down, reflect, put their lives into the form of a narrative, and then come back to it at a later point.

aspeers: On top of being a professor, you are also an established editor. What fascinates you about this particular area of work?

Hornung: Originally, when I became the general editor of the journal *Amerikastudien / American Studies* in 1990, I did not know whether I would be the right person for the job. Although I had done some assistant editorial work earlier, I initially hesitated because of the responsibility, but then I started liking it. After all, I did this for twelve years and, simultaneously, took on the monograph series *Amerikastudien / American Studies*.

What becomes fascinating in doing this kind of editorial work is that you are always at the forefront of what happens in scholarship. The manuscripts that you receive are always attempts by new or established scholars to present their latest research. Before anybody reads an article somewhere, you already know the latest trends. So this preknowledge, being at the source of new scholarship and criticism, is very exciting.

The second aspect is that, in this position, you can certainly help scholars to improve their writing when their manuscripts have potential. Of all of the manuscripts we receive, none of them go directly into print. Everybody revises—some more, some less. But what is important is that, especially with young academics who just start out publishing, as an editor you can really guide them into finding their own way. Therefore, one of the first things I decided when I became the editor was that it was no longer necessary to have a PhD. While my predecessors in the field said that only people with a PhD could publish in the journal, this was what I abandoned by reinforcing that what is important is the quality of the manuscript, nothing else.

Finally, as an editor, you can also shape research in planning the directions into which scholarship can go. Specifically, we often publish so-called thematic issues, which can prompt some scholars to consider new aspects for their research. Additionally, you engage different disciplines in American studies. On the other hand, you can encourage people who have original research to make it public. For instance, some of the work young scholars did in the 1990s had to do with technologies and American studies, which the majority of the academic community was not interested in yet at the time. However, doing a thematic issue on a prolific topic automatically generates changes in the mood of the whole scientific community. Overall, these are some of the very interesting aspects that editing brings along.

aspeers: As a graduate journal of American studies, we are, of course, interested in your thoughts about graduate publishing. Did you encounter any graduate-level publishing during your time in the US?

Hornung: Yes, I have been quite familiar with the journal *College English*, which was one of the first journals that published graduate students and is, by now, very established. In the years I spent in the United States as a student and later as a teacher and researcher, I have encountered many venues where graduate scholarship actively took place. I think it is a very important facet for young Americanists to use in order to gain experience and get into the field. The second aspect, as I said earlier, is that you have the potential to launch new areas that the older generation does not know about, which is an interaction between different generations of Americanists. However, I think it might not be the best idea to separate graduate publications and research from more advanced scholarship. Instead, the two should interact.

aspeers: As you already know, our current issue is organized around the topic of Crime and America. Hence, we were wondering: Have you ever had any personal experiences with crime and America?

Hornung: No, in the ten years that I have lived in the United States, I fortunately never encountered any problems of this kind. The only problem that I once ran into was in Kentucky. I was traveling across the country for eight weeks with my college

roommate and we used to sleep in a large car that his father gave us. Once, we went into a campsite, and then the police drove up to our car and they asked us where we were going to sleep. We said we would be sleeping in the car, as always. Then the police officer told us that we could not do this, but we told them that we notified the guards when we entered the park. So we went back and forth and then the police officer suddenly pulled his gun and said at gunpoint “You’ll leave now or you’ll see what’s going to happen!” But if this is criminality or not, I don’t know.

aspeers: After this real-life anecdote, we are very interested in your favorite crime fiction novel. Is there any book you particularly like?

Hornung: Well, there are many, but I still like hard-boiled detective fiction a lot. Especially Raymond Chandler is one of my favorites, but I think all of them are quite interesting.

aspeers: If you could choose, what famous crime fiction character would you like to be, if you could pick from all the great characters of traditional crime fiction?

Hornung: I think I would go for Edgar Allen Poe and choose Auguste Dupin because he is, in the mind of Poe, a character who solves crimes using methods of the natural sciences and the humanities. He solves problems by thinking ahead, identifying with the criminal, and using his imagination. Dupin needs imagination in order to survive. I think the important feature is that the police, with all the technology at their hands to solve the crime, never succeed. It is the creative mind of the detective, imaging the rationality of the criminal’s deed, which leads to the solution.

aspeers: As our last question, if you could have dinner with two famous American figures, who would you choose?

Hornung: I once met Toni Morrison, which was a brief encounter. If I could, having dinner with her would certainly be a great occasion now that she has published so many novels. It would also be interesting to, for some kind of weird reasons, maybe have along Theodore Roosevelt, as they are two people at totally different ends. Theodore Roosevelt is such a critical figure: He gained a Nobel Prize at the beginning of the twentieth century, he is one of the faces in Mount Rushmore, he was a Rough Rider, he was interested in winning the West, and so on. So, he was a great spirit and an intellectual, but at the same time very limited, both politically and ideologically. On the other hand, you have somebody like Toni Morrison, who is such a major intellectual, also a Nobel Prize winner, but comes from a totally different background. This, I think, would be a good constellation.

aspeers: Interesting choice. We thank you very much for taking the time for this interview and for sharing your insights and your personal and professional experiences. It was a pleasure talking to you.