

# A Continental Philosopher

BY KIMBERLY PARSLEY



Map is from Guthrie's Geographical and Historical Grammar (1792) courtesy of Kentucky Library and Museum. Photo by LaDonna Harmon. Illustration by Ben Davis.

**DR. MICHAEL J. SEIDLER, PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AND, SINCE 2004, A UNIVERSITY DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY, IS INTERNATIONALLY KNOWN AS AN EXPERT IN EARLY MODERN GERMAN PHILOSOPHY, PARTICULARLY THE NATURAL LAW TRADITION OF THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES.**

"In broad terms, my research deals chiefly with the moral, political, and legal philosophy of the early modern era — from 1500 to 1800 — and its relation to comparable philosophical issues today," Dr. Seidler said.

Although he has also published on other early modern philosophers like Kant, Hume, and Leibniz, for the past ten years Dr. Seidler's point of entry into the period has been the works of the seventeenth century German philosopher and political theorist Samuel Pufendorf (1632-1694), who was among the most influential authors in Europe during his lifetime and the first half of the eighteenth century.

Seidler's major work, which has spawned several smaller projects, has involved preparing a large volume in the official edition of Pufendorf's collected works, which is being published in Germany by the Akademie Verlag of Berlin. The volume is titled *Dissertationes academicae selectiores*, and it will contain fifteen long essays (in Latin) written by Pufendorf over sixteen years. Four of the essays are generally unknown and have never before been included in a collection, existing only as relatively rare first editions. Only one has been translated before, and that into German.

Dr. Seidler is the only American scholar involved in the project. The other editors — like most of the people working in this research area — are from Europe.

Before Seidler could begin the work of editing the essays, he first had to locate them, traveling to rare book libraries in Germany, Sweden, Finland, and England. Then he compared the various editions and printings, sometimes up to nine per essay, in order to establish an official text with variants in the footnotes.

Also, Dr. Seidler has had to research nearly 200 authors from different historical periods, countries, and linguistic communities who are referenced in Pufendorf's essays. "They articulate the historical, cultural, philosophical, and political associations needed to understand the individual essays, not only in the context of Pufendorf's own career and development, but also the broader intellectual and social milieu of the seventeenth century," he said.

Dr. Seidler described his work as "a kind of philological and intellectual detective work." This is because it requires patience, ingenuity, attentiveness, persistence, and the ability to see connections — not to mention some luck. Many of the materials he reads or consults are in Latin, Greek, German, French, Italian, Swedish, or other foreign languages.

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"One of the neat things about the work I do is that it fits so well with a lot of the philosophical interests I have in contemporary ethical and political theory," he said. Among these, Seidler cited the origin of moral obligation, the nature of political authority, the separation of church and state, social responses to religious and cultural diversity, and the meaning and duties of patriotism. A week before Sept. 11, 2001, he attended a conference in Germany on early modern conceptions of patriotism, and presented a paper about Pufendorf's influential essay on that topic (*De patria*).

"I had already worked much of that out by following Pufendorf's analyses, which use the main ancient and medieval discussions of the topic," he said. "Besides, I had read a lot of contemporary discussions of patriotism to give me conceptual flexibility in



approaching the historical texts. I always prepare like that when I do a paper, taking a comprehensive approach, because I think that the more sophisticated you are as a philosopher, the more sophisticated you will be as interpreter of historical texts of a similar nature."

Dr. Seidler said he feels equally at home in both periods, the early modern and the present, and that understanding one era helps him understand the other. "Some of what we're saying today is new and different — of course, much water has passed under the bridge — but in many respects, for better or worse, the intellectual problematic of the seventeenth century is still intensely relevant."

According to Seidler, people have always struggled to maintain traditions and customs while integrating new ideas and discoveries. He says he is drawn to that challenge of valuing what has been acquired but also testing it with new perspectives. "I find that a very fruitful tension," he said.

In further contribution to the scholarship on Pufendorf and the early modern period, Dr. Seidler is also working on two reprint editions of early English translations of Pufendorf. One of these is Edmund Bohun's 1696 translation of Pufendorf's notorious *On the State of the German Empire*, written in 1667. The other is John Crull's 1695 version of Pufendorf's *Introduction to the History*



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of *European States* (1682), a text used extensively in the eighteenth century, and frequently "continued" there by others who brought it up to date. These volumes will appear in a new *Natural Law and Enlightenment Classics* series, edited by Knud Haakonssen (Sussex University, U.K.) and published by the Liberty Fund, Inc. The first, which was recently completed and submitted, is slated for publication in 2006.

WKU students certainly benefit from Dr. Seidler's expertise and world renown, but scholars around the world have also been influenced by his work. He has evaluated Ph.D. dissertations in Finland, Canada, and Australia; reviewed book manuscripts submitted to

Cambridge University Press; and his research has been the basis of academic projects in yet other countries. For instance, Seidler said that he knows of students at Cambridge, Princeton, and other schools whose dissertations have relied on his writings. And three years ago, in the reading room of the Herzog August Bibliothek, in Wolfenbüttel, Germany, Seidler met a Hungarian scholar whose research project there had been influenced by one of his essays. "For weeks thereafter, I sat in the library looking at the back of someone who was there partly because of me. That was different," he said.

"I love my work," Seidler explained. "When people ask me what I do for fun or recreation, I never know how to respond. My scholarly activities have put me in touch with many smart and wonderful people around the world, including the dead ones. I am particularly pleased that my research not only generates further opportunities for myself, but that it also contributes to the kind of national and international recognition that is now so central to Western's mission."

