

CURRENT ISSUES IN BELGIAN HISTORY

Philosophy of history, from social criticism to philosophy of science and back again

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Last July Ghent University hosted a conference on “The Future of Theory and Philosophy of History”. This event served as the inaugural conference of the recently established *International Network for Theory of History* (INTH)¹. Both the conference and the network aimed to create new momentum in the discipline of theory and philosophy of history by fostering international collaboration and the exchange of ideas between its practitioners. The conference represented a successful first step toward this aim : it brought together theorists of history from a multitude of different traditions and language groups and with 270 participants and more than 180 presentations; it was the first large-scale conference in the field.

Ghent proved to be the ideal location for a conference of this kind. Although in Belgian history departments interest in theory of history has traditionally been limited, this attitude is rapidly changing. In recent years Belgian theorists of history have begun to follow in the footsteps of their Dutch colleagues. There has always been an important difference between Belgium and the Netherlands when it comes to the theory of history. This is most likely due to the diverging approaches of the founding fathers of history in the two countries. Belgian historians such as Henri Pirenne and François-Louis Ganshof were always quite focused on the practical aspects of the profession,

while famous Dutch historians such as Johan Huizinga and Jan Romein (who coined the term ‘*theoretische geschiedenis*’ (Theoretical history in Dutch) were more interested in its theoretical aspects. People who were interested in theoretical history in Flanders (in either teaching or research) mostly saw it as a side interest and many of these scholars received at least part of their education in the Netherlands, or went there in their early careers (for example Jo Tollebeek, Antoon Van Den Braembussche and Antoon De Baets). Recently, however, there has been a growing presence in theory of history in Flanders, a trend that is illustrated by the newly opened professorship in Metahistory at Ghent University. This professorship is part of the research line of “metahistory and public history”, and the research in theory of history done by the members of INTH tries to connect theoretical points of view to practical issues, taking Hayden White’s recent call for a ‘practical past’ as its slogan². This research agenda is promoted through an interdisciplinary Ghent-based research forum TAPAS; Thinking About the PAST, which among other things organizes lecture series and reading groups on the theory of history³. Also, cross border collaboration has increased; the INTH has invited several Dutch and international scholars such as Frank Ankersmit, Chris Lorenz, Keith Jenkins and Wulf Kansteiner to come to Belgium to share their research with students.

Internationally theorists of history have usually had a somewhat peripheral place in history departments. Even today scholars working in the field usually present their work in specialized parallel sessions in large conferences, or in small-scale workshops or sym-

1. <http://www.inth.ugent.be>. 2. HAYDEN WHITE, *The Practical Past*, *Historiein* 10 (2010), p. 10-19.

3. www.tapas.ugent.be.



Inaugural Conference
International Network for Theory of History

The Future *of the* Theory and Philosophy *of* History

Invited speakers include:
Frank Ankersmit
Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth
François Hartog
Wulf Kansteiner
Ethan Kleinberg
Chris Lorenz
Allan Megill
Elias Palti
Jörn Rüsen
Gabrielle Spiegel

July 10–13, 2013
Ghent, Belgium

www.inth.ugent.be

Cover of the conference poster, listing the keynote speakers.

posia. But the relatively marginal place of theory of history does not reflect the amount of intellectual energy and enthusiasm for the subject. Indeed, the last few decades has seen an astonishing growth in academic publications and journals on the theory and philosophy of history in many countries around the world. In addition to a series of well-established international journals such as *History and Theory*, *History of Historiography* and *Historical Methods*, a great number of new journals specialized in historical theory and historiography have appeared in the past few years : *Cromohs* (1996), *Rethinking History* (1997), *History and Memory* (1998), *Historiein* (1999), *Historiography East and West* (2003), *Journal for the Philosophy of History* (2007), *História da Historiografia* (2008), *Historiographies : journal of history and theory* (2010). Furthermore one should also mention the publication of a number of new book series by influential publishing houses : among others 'Making Sense of History : Studies in Meta-history, Historiography, and Intercultural Communication' (Berghahn Books), 'Approaches to History' (Routledge) and 'History : Concepts, Theories and Practice' (Pearsons Longman).

The impressive amount of publications on the theory of history, in the last decades, is a clear indication of the continuing interest in this intellectual domain. Rather than representing a situation of intellectual crisis, the relatively small and even declining visibility of theory and philosophy of history within broader academic fields was actually symptomatic of a lack of institutional grounding; philosophers and theorists of history are today usually spread out over different departments, regions and traditions, and often work at the periphery of more well established disciplines. The aim

of the network and conference therefore, was to bring this diversity of scholars together to reflect on the identity and the relevance of the theory of history as a discipline unto itself.

Whether side discipline or field of its own, the theory of history is certainly not new. It has a long and venerable tradition going back at least to the 18th century with scholars such as Vico, Voltaire, Hegel and Marx who formulated theses about the origin, goal and meaning of the process of "History" with capital H. For a long time this intellectual tradition, which later on came to be called the substantive or speculative philosophy of history, was very popular and influential. Around the middle of the twentieth century, however, the tradition went into strong decline and sometimes even became subject of a great intellectual and political taboo. More recently, in the years after World War II, theory or philosophy of history was increasingly seen as an 'auxiliary science' which had to reflect on the epistemic status of the writing of history (with a small 'h'). Philosophers such as Carl Hempel and Ernest Nagel discussed how historians could or should create reliable explanations of historical events, and how historians could warrant their cognitive claims about the past⁴. These discussions accompanied developments such as the 'New Economic History' and 'Cliometrics' in history-writing itself, which were looking for ways to give the writing of history a more 'sound' scientific status. Through these developments, it was thought that the writing of history might be able to move away from its traditional narrative form and towards a more 'scientific' way of writing.

Although Cliometrics and the New Economic History had their successes, it proved to be

4. CARL HEMPEL, "The Function of General Laws in History", in *Journal of Philosophy* 39, p. 35-48; ERNEST NAGEL, "Determinism", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 20 (3), p.- 291-317.

too ambitious to extend their methods to the writing of history as a whole. Furthermore, the rigid philosophical schemes of Hempel and Nagel, with their focus on logical coherence of individual statements about the past, were considered to be unattractive or unhelpful by practicing historian, and as a consequence, the philosophy of history was gradually estranged from the mainstream of the historical profession. This drifting apart sparked a theoretical reaction (lead by key figures such as Louis Mink, William Walsh and Morton White)⁵ which aimed to rehabilitate historical narratives, focusing on the entirety of the historical account, and in this way re-unite the theory and practice of writing history. From the 1970s onwards however, this ‘narrative turn’ in philosophy of history became more radical. Historical theory quickly moved beyond its role as the handmaiden of history and started (most notably in the work of Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit) to criticise history-writing, particularly its alleged positivistic premises, and its loose epistemic claims⁶. These thinkers shifted the focus away from justifications about how historians could find objective facts, and toward explanations about why they could not: the common enterprise of narrativist and postmodernist theories of history was to question the possibility of absolute objectivity in the writing of history, and emphasise that historians are always at least partly determined by their own historical contexts, as well as by cultural idioms, similar to the ones used in fiction. Narrativists also argued that truths and interpretations themselves were

narratively structured. Despite its criticism of the discipline of history, or maybe because of it, the narrativist turn also had its counterpart in historical practice, more particularly in the form of the ‘New Cultural History’⁷.

During the last twenty years or so theory of history has moved beyond arguments about narrative constructivism and become increasingly concerned with more diverse questions. For example, there has been an important return to old questions about the nature and role of speculative philosophy of history. The grand and sweeping philosophical histories of Hegel and Spengler and others had been discredited during the Cold War because of alleged ties with Communism, but in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in so-called ‘substantive philosophy of history’. Theorists of history have also been increasingly interested in non-western and bottom-up perspectives on history, different ideas about the nature of time and the possibility of multiple historicities, that is different experiences of history. Although discussions about the scientific status and the literary tropes of history-writing are still common, the last decades has seen a new focus on non-historiographical ways of relating to the past. In part prompted by the “memory-boom” in the 1980s and ‘90s, both historians and theorists of history have looked beyond academic history-writing and begun to study the way the broader public engages with past. Some influential theories that have been developed in this regard are those of ‘historical experience’ and historical ‘presen-

5. LOUIS MINK, “Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument”, in ROBERT CANARY & HENRY KOZICKI, *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, p. 129-149; MORTON WHITE, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, New York, Harper & Row, 1969; WILLIAM WALSH, “Historical Causation”, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63 (1962), p. 217-236. 6. HAYDEN WHITE, *Metahistory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975; Id., *Tropics of Discourse*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978; FRANK ANKERSMIT, *Narrative Logic*, Meppel, Kris Repru, 1981. 7. See LYNN HUNT, *The New Cultural History*, Berkeley, The University of California Press, 1989.



*Wulf Kansteiner (Binghamton University) and Chris Lorenz (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) during the conference *The Future of Theory and Philosophy of History* in July 2013 at Ghent University.*

ce⁸; notions which focus on people's intimate and emotional relationship with the past, instead of the more distanced and dispassionate comportment towards the past which is often said to be the ideal to which historian should aspire. Some scholars even consider the possibility of an existentialist turn in history writing⁹.

The diversity of the field of philosophy of history was reflected in the INTH conference. During the four days of the conference, a total of 42 parallel sessions covered an array of different topics, ranging from abstract philosophical issues to much more practical concerns. There were, however some notable recurring themes. For example, a large part of the conference was devoted to discussions on classical and newer forms of narrativist analysis. Ankersmit's idea of historical experience was also a common point of discussion and the cause of much controversy, especially coming from critics who see the notion of experience as trying, but failing, to circumvent the problem of language. Meanwhile another group of papers at the conference considered the potential of new media and digital forms of representation to overcome the pitfalls of narrative history writing. The question of time and temporality in history was another important point of discussion at the conference. The traditional conception of unilinear homogeneous time, on which most history writing is based, has already been refuted by scholars, and has been shown to be a relatively recent intellectual development. During the conference, some asked how we

can write a history taking into account multiple temporalities. The work of Reinhart Koselleck featured heavily in these discussions¹⁰.

As important as it is to review what was most discussed at the conference, it is also interesting to consider what topics received less attention or were not discussed at: Surprisingly there was little mention of postcolonial history and non-western forms of historicity. There was also too little consideration of issues of gender in the philosophy of history. In the roundtable discussion that concluded the conference, some other absences in the field were identified by the speakers. Ewa Domanska argued that history and theory of history are lagging behind other human and social sciences because current key terms in these fields, like "new materialism" and "new vitalism", have not received any attention from historians or philosophers of history. Wulf Kansteiner provocatively condemned the pursuit of theory for theory's sake as uninteresting, and insisted that theorists of history need to pay more attention to new and diverse historiographical practices outside of the traditional historiography. Kansteiner suggested that theorists of history should especially pay attention to visual culture and develop a theory of the historiography of visibility. Kansteiner also began to discuss how digital media is already raising the question of non-narrative representations of the past and pointed out that many of the dynamics of traditional historiography are altered by these new forms of representation.

8. See FRANK ANKERSMIT, *Sublime Historical Experience*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005; EELCO RUNIA, "Presence", *History and Theory* 45 (1), p. 1-29; HANS-ULRICH GÜMBRECHT, *Production of Presence*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004. 9. Frank Ankersmit mentioned the 'existential turn' at the conference. Here Paul Ricoeur's writing on what he calls 'la condition historique' serves as an important inspiration and example. See *La Mémoire, l'Historie, l'Oubli*, Paris, Seuil, 2000. 10. Two of Reinhart Koselleck's most influential works are, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik Geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1979 (which appeared in English translation in 1985) and *Zeitschichten: Studien zur Historik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2000.

Elizabeth Ermarth added to Kansteiner and Domanska's calls for history and historians to catch up with the times, by discussing the fact that history is still dealing with an antiquated Newtonian vision of time which sees time as a universal constant. She argued that historians should change their assumptions about the nature of time to reflect an Einsteinian logic and consider time as a "dimension of events".

The criticisms of Domanska, Kansteiner and Ermarth resonated with the dominant tone of the discussion at the roundtable which was mostly skeptical about the ability of historians or theorists of history to transform historiography into a relevant 'tool' for solving contemporary problems. History, according to Elizabeth Ermarth, is in "a methodological crisis". When the moderator, Chris Lorenz, opened up the discussion by giving the last word to the audience, some voices (most notably Keith Jenkins) backed the pessimistic view about the potential of history or historians to offer society a politically empowering discourse. In contrast however, many of the younger scholars in the audience, and Allan Megill on the podium, were more optimistic about the current and potential role of history and historical theory in society. The continuing critical roles were stressed and some examples of the need for concrete critical intellectual interventions were mentioned.

As initiators of the INTH and organisers of its inaugural conference we are inclined toward the more optimistic diagnosis of the fields of historiography and historical theory. The debate was certainly lively and went to the root of many scholars' visions about their own role as historians. The reflections on the theory of history raised at this conference and in the field at large are important for all historians

and students of history to consider. The newly found diversity of the field indicates the potential of research in theory of history to become more relevant for historians as well as for the general public.

It is, of course, still important for history students to learn about classical themes such as the nature of evidence, causation and explanation, the (partially) subjective nature of the writing of history, or the use of literary tropes in the works of historians. But it might be even more important to learn about the newer topics.

First of all a theoretical perspective could allow history students to take a step back, and look at the place of the discourse of history itself in society. For instance, the way historical discourse is used as a means of reconciliation or repression in regions that struggle with a traumatic past. Training in the theory of history would prepare students to argue for the contemporary relevance of their discipline.

Second, by studying different ways in which the broader public deals with the past, or by studying different forms of historical representation, young historians will be able to reflect better on their discipline. They will be able to form opinions about how history can be represented in a non-written way, for example in museums and documentary films, but also in commemorations, re-enactments, fictional films, video games, literature etc. This will give them the necessary tools to expand their critical gaze as historians beyond the academic world of written non-fiction.

Thirdly, by paying due attention to the tradition of substantive philosophy of history, historians will be better positioned to engage



Dutch historian and philosopher Frank Ankersmit (University of Groningen) in discussion during the July 2013 conference in Ghent.

analytically with new grand historical theories that emerge in contemporary political debates or out of other scholarly disciplines. Modern historians have often had a somewhat uneasy relationship with hugely popular works of people such as Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington, Steven Pinker or Jared Diamond. In essence, these are speculative or substantive philosophies of history, and a theoretical knowledge of the genre and its critical potential (exemplified in people such as Marcel Gauchet or Michel Foucault) can give historians the necessary tools to address these works and to use them in a critical way without dismissing them altogether, as is often done by current historians

At INTH, we are optimistic about the future of theory and philosophy of history as a critical perspective on the writing of history, and other

forms of historical representation or historical consciousness. Nevertheless, we do recognize that, at this point in time, the discipline is somewhat hampered by its own success. Increasing diversity in the field combined with a lack of institutional anchoring has exacerbated problems of scholarly interaction between different national traditions and research themes, and has also made relations with practicing historians more difficult. These are urgent practical issues that the theory and philosophy of history needs to address if it is to become an important field of research once again. We believe that the establishment of the International Network for Theory of History and the institution of biannual conferences in the theory of history, can help to promote cohesion, consolidate the insights of the copious scholarship that has already been produced, and stimulate further research.

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