

Estevão de Rezende Martins (1947-2025)

It is with the greatest sorrow that I write this: my great friend and former academic advisor Estevão de Rezende Martins passed away on January 14, 2025.

He was a multi-tasking, multitalented humanist whose thought and activities stretched across philosophy, history, pedagogy, and international relations. His main focus, however, was on philosophy and theory of history, a field in that he decisively helped shape and institutionalize in the Brazilian academic landscape. He was the founding president of the Brazilian Society for Theory and History of Historiography (SBTHH) and served as a bureau member of the International Commission for History and Theory of History from 2010 to 2022.



Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1947, Estevão Chaves de Rezende Martins attended a Jesuit school in his hometown before leaving for São Paulo to study philosophy at a small Catholic college. On his way to becoming a priest, the Jesuits sent him abroad for further studies, beginning with German lessons at a Goethe Institute, where he first met his future wife. Between 1971 and 1973 he studied theology and canon law at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, and then moved to Munich, leaving theology and his previous plans for a career in the priesthood behind. There he wrote a doctoral thesis on the notion of freedom in Kant's 'pre-critical' texts, which he completed in 1976, under the supervision of the eminent historian of philosophy Wolfgang Röd. Estevão also learned a great deal from two other professors then working at the University of Munich, the historian Thomas Nipperdey and the philosopher Hans-Michael Baumgartner.

He returned to Brazil in 1977 and resettled in the new national capital, in the middle of the country. He would teach at the University of Brasília for more than 40 years, and in 2018 he was honored with the rare title of professor emeritus. In the meantime, he supervised more than 70 master's and doctoral students, served on dozens of hiring committees throughout the country, reviewed hundreds of grants and scholarship applications to various funding bodies, directed the University of Brasília's Institute of Human Sciences, worked as a legislative consultant to the Brazilian Federal Senate, and much more.

And, of course, he built up an extensive and interdisciplinary list of publications. From the 1980s he gradually added to the skills of a historian of philosophy acquired during his PhD those of a philosopher of history. We may say that then a new facet of his relationship with Kant's philosophy emerged: rather than subjects of historical study themselves, the Kantian concepts became key components of a theoretical framework for the analysis of historical knowledge. Accordingly, in a series of stimulating texts, he would formulate calls for a "transcendental theory of history" or examine the "use of categories" by historians.

One of the main inspirations for this move from the history of philosophy to the philosophy of history was certainly Baumgartner, who, after ending his career as a top-class football player, had managed to become perhaps the greatest Kantian philosopher of history of the second half of the 20th century. Also very important were further academic contacts in West Germany which Estevão was able to consolidate particularly during his stay as a Humboldt fellow in 1982-83. It is impossible not to mention another esteemed ICHTH member in this context, namely Jörn Rüsen. Estevão's thoughts on history and historiography were developed out of profound conversations with Rüsen. If the latter's texts are so widely read today by Brazilian scholars in historical theory and history education, this is to a large extent due to Estevão's mediating influence. He translated key texts by his German friend into Portuguese and accompanied him during visits to numerous Brazilian universities. On these occasions Estevão's sensational simultaneous translations of the lectures were almost as impressive as the lectures themselves.

On a personal note, I should say that I wrote my MA thesis under Estevão in Brasília and then proceeded to work on my PhD with Jörn in Witten and Essen. I am now beginning to realize the extent to which my own career path is a subproduct of the great academic exchange between the two. In any case, there is no doubt that without Estevão's talks, texts, classes, mediation, and advice so many things would have turned out differently for me, both academically and personally. And by "differently" I actually mean worse,

less meaningful, less fruitful, or less exciting. I know many people who would look back on their relationship with him and come to essentially the same conclusion.

During an interview commissioned by *História da Historiografia* and published in 2010, I asked Estevão whether he would still consider himself to be a Kantian thinker. He quickly responded “yes, yes”, adding that even though he had long since ceased to be a Kant scholar he still regarded Kant as “indispensable for the justification of historical knowledge”. It makes sense to think that back in the 1980s he was attracted to the analysis of historiography by the intuition that historical knowledge reflects what is probably the most complex and interesting combination of pure and practical reason that can possibly obtain. This key Kantian motif echoes in almost all his more theoretical works from the 1990s onwards, which may be read as attempts to account for the tension between truth and use, facts and values, accuracy and identity, cognition and norm in historiography. How can “the methodical procedures of quality control” – as he liked to say – be reconciled with the practical functions of historical knowledge in extra-epistemic domains of social life? Developed from the dichotomy pure reason/practical reason, that is a problem accompanying Estevão in all his theoretical texts and speeches. In his quest to deal with it, he oscillated between epistemology, methodology, and didactics of history, in a back and forth that fermented very valuable reflections, such as those gathered in the 2017 book *Teoria e filosofia da história*, a collection of theoretical texts originally published between 2002 and 2016.

There is much more to say about his reflections on historical knowledge, not to mention his texts on other topics such as human rights, social-democracy, the European integration process, the constitution of Mercosur, Brazilian parliamentary history, the concept of revolution, Nicholas of Cusa, or Jean-Paul Sartre. May the overview above suffice to illustrate the breadth of Estevão’s intellectual interests and the intensity of his engagement with the field of the history and theory of historiography.

Estevão will be missed by his wife, son, grandsons, and brothers. He is also survived by numerous friends, colleagues, and former students who were deeply touched by his sudden passing. He has been mourned across the country, in official statements published by different universities and organizations, as well as in hundreds of posts on social media. Like me, his friends around the globe are now going through the difficult process of reconfiguring their own worlds without Estevão’s generous, learned, and witty presence.

They may find a little solace in one of his last published texts: a letter written for the book *Letters to Young Historians*, edited by Mauro Dillmann and Willian Junior Bonete in 2024. The whole letter now reads like a kind of academic testament, especially in the following fragment concerning academic ethic:

“Here is another piece of good news: all that you [young historian] need to do to become a historian is work, but to become a good historian you also need to let history work on you. In other words, if historical knowledge is cumulative, then time is on our side, and by this I mean both yours and mine. Since I am older and have been longer at work, it is a matter of course that I have accumulated more knowledge than you. But keep on working and one day you will know more than me. It’s up to you now!”

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