

Jury Report on Berber Bevernage, *'We victims and survivors declare the past to be in the present'*. *Time, Historical (In)Justice and the Irrevocable*, dissertation submitted to the University Gent on May 14th. 2009.

Berber Bevernage's dissertation is most exceptional in at least three respects. In the first place, despite of his youth, he is both a creative and an independent thinker and researcher. Secondly, he manifests himself as a radical thinker – in the literal sense that he follows all the problems in his dissertation to their roots. And thirdly he turns out to be a real interdisciplinary thinker and scholar, who is at home not only in history and philosophy, but also in 'transitional justice', anthropology and psychology. This broad combination of skills and knowledge is rare.

The set-up and structure of his dissertation are crystal clear. At the beginning he presents a forceful and highly original thesis, going to the very heart of history as a discipline. It is the thesis that the conception of time of history as a discipline is at the root of history's inability to conceptualize the presence of a traumatic past (alias 'the irrevocable' in Jankelevitch phrasing). He argues for his thesis both in an empirical way – in the chapters on Argentina, South Africa and Sierra Leone – and in a theoretical or philosophical way. Along these two ways he develops the important argument that modern historical discourse is structurally more compatible with the perpetrators' point of view than the victims'.

In his treatment of a wide variety of thinkers he always does justice to both the authors intentions as to the complexity of their arguments. With each author he is dealing with he shows immanently where an argument 'got stuck' and why the argument failed to contribute to the solution of the problem of 'the irrevocable' in history. In the end, he accomplishes nothing less than a completely new understanding of the referential illusion of historical discourse. According to him, 'Modern Historical Discourse' gets its powerful distancing capacities by mixing substantive notions of time with a strongly naturalized chronological sense of time that has a strangely impalpable character and is hard to question.

Like many truly original works of criticism, his arguments seem so perfectly obvious in hindsight. He does so with the help of some of the ideas of the late Jacques Derrida – especially his idea of spectrality, which he uses to break through the traditional and sterile binary opposition of an 'absent' versus a 'present' past.

With all the authors he is addressing the author remains nuanced, meticulously weighing arguments pro and con. His capacity to combine empathy for an argument while staying critical is remarkable. Also with regard to arguments he finds convincing his love for them is never blind. Moreover, his style of arguing and writing is always to the point and crystal clear. This combination of qualities is quite exceptional.

In the domain of philosophy of history Bevernages study is representing surprising novelty. The same can be said concerning the domain of 'transitional justice'. His argument also connects to the recent debates concerning 'memory', 'presence' and 'distance'. His book can be seen as a very fruitful and original proposal how to conceive of these issues in the future. His consequent striving to uncover 'metaphysical remnants' in thinking about history is as an academic *tour de force* and an intellectual adventure. This is a truly novel step in historical theory that probably will define the terms in which issues of history, time and (in)justice will be discussed in the near future both by historians and by philosophers of history.

Chris Lorenz, Chair of the jury, ICHTH-Prize for the Best Dissertation in Historical Theory and Historiography 2009 – 2012.

Jury members:

Ewa Domanska

Eduardo Tortarolo

Estevão de Rezende Martins

