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From Philosophy of History to Philosophy of Historicities

Some Ideas on a Potential Future of Historical Theory

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Berber Bevernage does not share the pessimistic view that the philosophy of history is in crisis or coming to an end: it can have a bright and fascinating future. However in order to remain relevant, he argues, philosophy of history should look beyond academic historiography and transform into a broad 'philosophy of historicities' that also pays attention to the wide variety of extra-academic ways of dealing with the past. In order to do this current philosophy of history has to overcome a number challenges. First, it has to recognise that academic historiography did not develop in an intellectual vacuum but is closely related to particular social, cultural and political presuppositions about time and historicity on which it is partly dependent but which it can also reinforce or contradict. Second, it should recognise that different approaches to time and historicity have different social, cultural and political functions and not restrict its focus to philosophy of science or epistemological/cognitive issues. Third, it should focus on the ethics of history.

Introduction: philosophy of history, ending once again?

In the introduction to this forum the editors raised the question of the present state and future prospects of the philosophy of history in the Netherlands and Belgium.[1] To stress the timeliness of their question they remark that anno 2012 philosophy of history has lost much of the prestige it once enjoyed: recently, they note, fewer discussions on historical theory take place in Dutch, a decreasing number of Dutch and Flemish history departments have their

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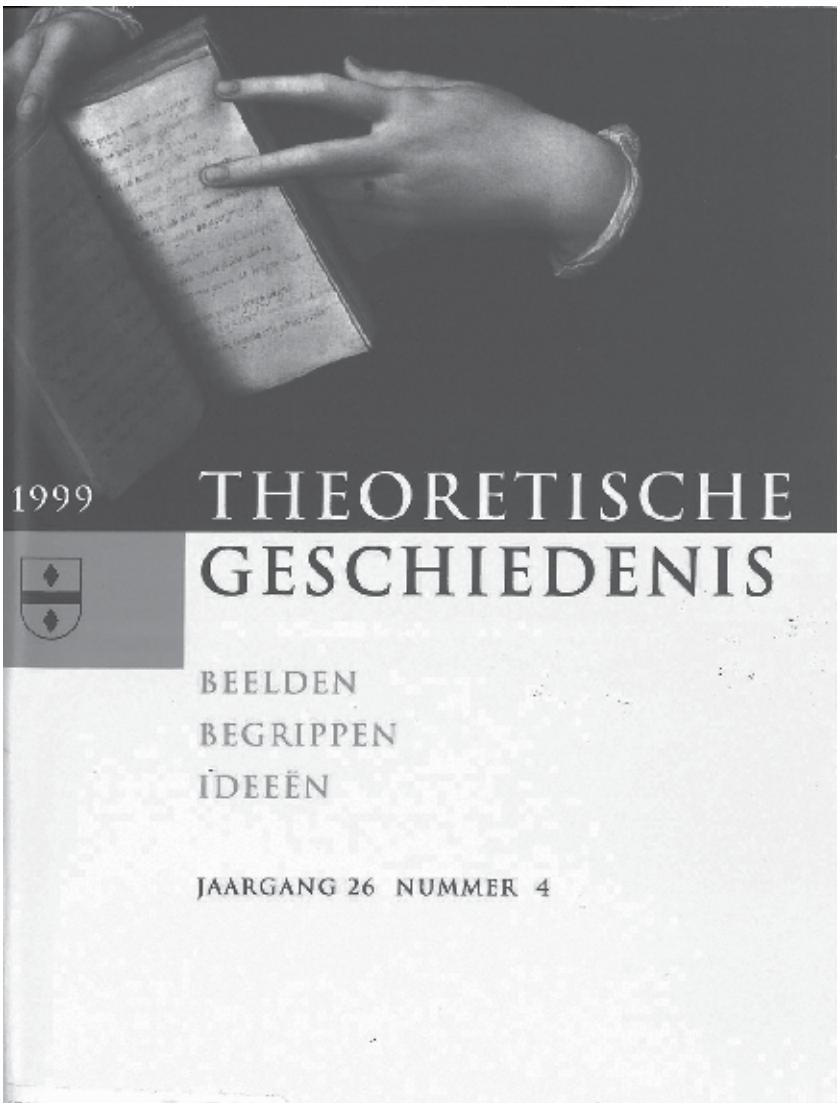

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Cover of the final issue of *Theoretische Geschiedenis* 26:4 (1999).

own theoretician-in-residence and many historians seem convinced that they can conduct the reflection on their discipline themselves.

These findings would make the more pessimistically inclined observer wonder whether historical theory actually has a future at all; whether we are not witnessing the end of the philosophy of history. I do not share this pessimistic view however. For several reasons I believe that philosophy of history *has* a future and that it can be a bright and fascinating one.

It is not the first time (and probably not the last) that claims about the demise of philosophy of history have been made. As in the case of history, the end of philosophy of history has often been predicted: e.g. the arguments by the philosophers Odo Marquard and Herman Lübbe about philosophy of history's departure [*Abschied*] or reduction to left-over functions.[2] Yet just as *posthistoire*-claims over and again turn out to be products of a particular time and place – and thus paradoxically turn out to be part and parcel of the ongoing historical process they deny – *post philosophie d'histoire*-claims most often are products of (implicit) competing philosophies of history that by their very existence contradict the claim they make.

Moreover I agree with Aviezer Tucker's analysis that philosophy of history might not be doing well on an institutional level or in terms of academic job opportunities but that internationally the field is blossoming on an intellectual level and in terms of quantity and quality of publications.[3] If the number of publications on historical theory written in Dutch has decreased during the last decade(s) – a phenomenon symbolised by the merger of the Dutch journal *Theoretische Geschiedenis* into the journal *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* – this accords with a broader academic trend towards internationalisation in which specialised themes are increasingly discussed in English, while only the more generalist journals in less widely used languages can survive. On a global level however, several new journals and books series are dedicated to philosophy of history and the very diverse contributions published in these journals and series betray a growing interdisciplinary interest in the subject.[4] In order to further promote the subject and foster international collaboration between theorists of history I and a group of young colleagues recently set up an 'International Network for Theory of History'

1 Many thanks to Lore Colaert and Kenan Van de Mieroop for their comments.

2 O. Marquard, *Schwierigheiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main 1982); H. Lübbe, *Geschichtsphilosophie. Verbliebene Funktionen* (Jena 1993).

3 A. Tucker, 'The Future of the Philosophy of Historiography', *History and Theory* 40:1 (2001) 37-56.

4 Some recent journals are: *Cromohs* (1996), *Rethinking History* (1997), *Historein* (1999), *Historiography East and West* (2003), *Journal for the Philosophy of History* (2007), *História da Historiografia* (2008) and *Historiographies: Journal of History and Theory* (2010).

(http://www.inth.ugent.be/) that serves as a forum for the exchange of ideas and as a platform for organising international conferences.[5]

Beyond the 'critical' versus 'speculative'-dichotomy

Of course it cannot be denied that philosophy of history has had its ups and downs. This certainly can be perceived if one considers the long-term history of the philosophy of history by including the influential tradition of 'substantive' (in pejorative terms 'speculative') philosophy of history whose genealogy is generally traced back to Voltaire or Vico and includes illustrious thinkers such as Hegel, Marx and Croce. From this perspective one could indeed argue, as Hans Baumgartner does, that 'Philosophy of history nowadays is a formerly dominant fundamental philosophy neutralised into being a marginal discipline'.[6]

The demise of substantive philosophy of history in the academic sphere is well-known. Rather than being regretted however, this demise is generally represented as the result of a rational evolution in which a more scientific 'critical' philosophy of history overcame the vices of metaphysics and speculation. Critical philosophy of history could do this, it is argued, because it resists the temptation to reflect on the process of history itself and focuses instead on historical research or on the language and narratives of historians.

Although I am grateful for the intellectual accomplishments of 'critical' philosophy of history, I regret this tendency to reduce philosophy of history to a mere philosophy of (academic) historiography.[7] To have a bright future I believe theorists of history have to look beyond academic historiography and transcend the sterile division between 'critical' and 'substantive' philosophy of history.

If one feature characterises our relation with the past today, it is undoubtedly the fact that this relation can no longer convincingly be claimed as the privileged, let alone exclusive, domain of academic historiography. Due to a series of recent societal evolutions, such as the 'memory boom', the rise of 'public history' and the increased international concern with 'historical (in)justice', academic historiography seems to be losing its 'hegemony in the closed space of retrospection'.[8] While this evolution may be resented by many historians it offers fascinating new intellectual challenges for theorists of history.

5 Colleagues, other than myself, involved in this project are Lore Colaert, Anton Froeyman, Broos Delanote, Kalle Pihlainen.

6 H.M. Baumgartner, 'Philosophy of History after the End of the Formative Substantial Philosophy of History', in: P. Koslowski (ed.), *The Discovery of Historicity in German Idealism and Historicism* (Berlin 2005) 149-171, 164.

7 This tendency is still often defended: e.g. A. Tucker (ed.), *Our Knowledge of the Past: A Philosophy of Historiography* (Cambridge 2004); J.L. Gorman, *Historical Judgement* (Montreal 2008).

8 P. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris 2000) 458.

In the context of the current intensified societal interest in history and memory I believe philosophy of history should evolve into a broad 'philosophy of historicities' that, besides focusing on academic historiography, should pay attention to the wide variety of extra-academic ways of dealing with time and historicity. With our research group in Ghent University we try to move in this direction by applying a metahistorical perspective to the use of discourses of history, memory and historical time in post-conflict situations and 'transitional justice'.

Toward a philosophy of historicities

Yet in order to transform into such a broader philosophy of historicities, current philosophy of history has to overcome various challenges. First, a philosophy of historicities has to recognise that academic historiography did not develop, and does not function, in an intellectual vacuum but is closely related to a range of particular social, cultural and political assumptions and beliefs about time and historicity on which it is partly dependent but which it can also reinforce or contradict.

Some recent branches of historical theory have already started critically analysing this relation between academic historiography and broader social, cultural and political approaches to time and historicity. An example that deserves special mention is the work on changing 'regimes of historicity' and 'time regimes' by scholars such as François Hartog, Lucian Hölscher, Aleida Assmann and Peter Fritzsche.

Generally however, the central assumptions that underpin academic historiography and popular views of history have not received the attention they deserve. This applies even to the most fundamental ones such as those on the nature of historical time, the borders between past and present, notion(s) of historical distance, et cetera.[9] The attention deficit concerning these basic assumptions, or 'ontological commitments', is undoubtedly partly due to the taboo on metaphysics that has dominated historical theory during recent decades. Yet, given the importance of these (often implicit) ontological assumptions, historical theory cannot afford to continue this taboo. I would even argue that philosophy of history should turn into a form of critical metaphysics in Collingwood's sense of a science that traces and makes visible the 'absolute presuppositions' that underpin our scientific and popular worldviews.[10]

9 Important recent exceptions are the work on historical distance by Mark Phillips and the theme issue of *History and Theory* (December 2004) on this subject.

10 R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford 2002).

The analysis of the cultural diversity of these absolute presuppositions should at once enable theorists of history to address a question already raised some time ago by 'subaltern' historians such as Ashis Nandy, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sanjay Seth: namely, to what extent can academic historiography claim universality and to what extent is it a Western construct with particularistic features and interests?

Secondly, a philosophy of historicities should recognise that different approaches to time and historicity have different social, cultural and political functions. Philosophers of history all too often restrict their perspective to that of philosophy of science and accordingly define the (proper) function of historiography primarily, or even exclusively, in epistemological/cognitive terms. This leads to an undervaluation of the plurality of social, political and cultural functions of historiography (even in its academic incarnation) and to a misrepresentation of alternative approaches to historicity – e.g. relating to memory, musealisation, (collective) mourning, theologies of history, tradition, myths of origin, et cetera – as instances of bad historiography unable to deliver true historical knowledge.

Hayden White's recent proposal to focus on the 'practical past' is a promising evolution in this context.[11] Yet we should be careful not to contrast this notion of a practical past with that of a historical past, as White tends to do, because this seems to imply that the historical past has no practical dimensions. It should be clear however, that the very habit of treating the past exclusively as an object of knowledge – thus not as a source of moral or religious authority, an object of mourning, a collection of wrongs to be set right, a source of legal precedents, et cetera – has direct practical implications and is not neutral or innocent.

It is about time to ask how historical discourse functions as a cultural, social and political force and how particular approaches to time and historicity influence the way we make history. Rather than merely focusing on historical *research* and the *writing/representation* of history, a philosophy of historicities should also ask how history is '*made*' in the sense of how it is enacted and re-enacted. In this context I have argued that an important source of inspiration can be found in J. L. Austin's famous differentiation between *constative* utterances which describe a given reality (e.g. 'this is a human bone') and *performative* utterances which bring about certain (social) realities (e.g. 'I name this ship' or 'I hereby swear').[12] In my research on the use of historical discourse in post-conflict situations and transitional justice I made grateful use of this differentiation to show that historical discourse is not merely used to represent historical reality or produce historical knowledge but also to (partly) 'performatively' constitute certain (socio-)historical realities – e.g. to

11 H. White, 'The Practical Past', *Historein* 10 (2010) 10-19.

12 J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Cambridge 1962).

symbolically put the violent past at distance by creating a break between past and present.[13]

This brings me to a third issue that I believe philosophy of history will have to address if it wants to transform into a philosophy of historicities and remain relevant for historians as well as a broader society – that of the ethics of history. Once one pays more attention to the different functions and performativity of historiography, it soon becomes clear that historical discourse can have strong ethical implications. Yet in contrast to many branches of social and human science – such as anthropology, psychology and sociology – for a long time historians and philosophers of history seldom engaged in profound reflections on the ethical implications of their work. This situation recently started to change with the publication of a number of works which *do* focus on ethics.[14] Much work is still to be done however. One factor that especially makes it necessary to broaden and deepen our analysis of the ethics of history is the increasing confluence of historiography and jurisdiction that can be perceived recently, for example, in the establishment of truth commissions and historical commissions and in the growing demand for historians to serve as expert-witnesses in courts. In this context one should not merely focus on the deontology of historians or on the political (ab)use of history, but also on the way in which ethics are ingrained in historical discourse itself, for example by focusing on the ethical implications inherent in notions of historical distance and in our habit of giving privilege to cognitive relations to the past.

Conclusion

One important realisation of historical theory is its observation that academic historiography and broader forms of historical consciousness are themselves subject to historical change. The same applies to philosophy of history, which should accordingly keep track of and keep up with the change undergone by its object of study. Yet I am confident that historical theory will remain relevant for historians *and* a broader society if it pays sufficient attention to the diversity of mechanisms for dealing with the past and to the way these are embedded in, interact with, or even partly constitute broader cultural, social and political contexts. ◀

13 B. Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence: Time and Justice* (New York 2012).

14 See for example: F. Bédarida (ed.), *The Social Responsibility of the Historian* (New York 1994): D. Carr et al. (eds.), *The Ethics of History* (Chicago 2004) and the special issue 'Historians and Ethics' in *History and Theory* (December 2004).

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