

## **'The Practical Past: on the advantages and disadvantages of history for life' (Ouro Preto (Brazil); 23-26 August 2016)**

### **Conference**

Should history serve present-day life and action, and can it do so? These questions have long interested historians and philosophers of history. They were central to Friedrich Nietzsche's famous critique of the excess of history that had, according to him, intellectually paralyzed his contemporaries. They were similarly raised in Hannah Arendt's criticism that history and historical consciousness in general belong to the 'vita contemplativa' rather than to the 'vita activa' strongly favored by her. In the same vein the idea of a strict division between a 'practical past' and a 'historical past' was promoted by Michael Oakeshott.

Yet, despite its longevity, the multifaceted discussion on the 'advantages and disadvantages of history for life' seems to acquire a new relevance and urgency today. Academic historiography, said Paul Ricoeur, is losing its 'hegemony in the space of retrospection.' Numerous scholars and critics have remarked that academic history is increasingly forced to compete with a multitude of other ways of dealing with the past. The 'memory boom', the rise of public history, the increased use of history in courts and in truth/historical commissions and the experimentation with new mediums of historical representation have combined to challenge historiography's privileged position.

All of these alternative approaches arguably aim for a 'practical' relation to the past, often suggesting a return of the *historia magistra vitae* and a growing interest in extracting moral and political lessons, or even an existential sense of orientation, from the past. Implicitly or explicitly, these alternative approaches often criticize academic historiography for its alleged impractical nature, its inability to render the past useful in the present and its unwillingness to serve as a guide for present action.

A similar criticism was recently reformulated by Hayden White, who follows Nietzsche in insisting that history be evaluated according to its usefulness for life, or, as he puts it, its ability to answer the question "what is to be done." White is one of an increasingly large number of scholars who have proclaimed the continuing need for a more practical relation to the past as a guide for action or a source of meaning in life.

On the other hand, against these arguments, several historians and philosophers of history have defended the position that academic history should focus on the production of knowledge for knowledge's sake. They reject practical or ethical aspirations and reaffirm the importance of speaking truthfully about the past (e.g. Allan Megill). These scholars resist the temptations coming of 'presentism' (e.g. Lynn Hunt) and the 'surfeit' or even 'religion' of memory (e.g. Charles Maier, Henry Rousso, Pierre Nora).

We invite scholars from far and near to weigh in on this debate, to reflect on the usefulness and tenability of the distinction between the practical and historical past and to explore its potential as an analytical device. Can the practical past really be distinguished from the historical past as an entity on its own? If history should serve life, then how can it best do so? If we are to throw off the 'shackles' of the historical past what can we adopt in its place? Are there other historicities to be explored; are there different ways to orient ourselves in time that could be embraced? How can we relate practical to disciplinary histories? How might disciplinary history address the concerns for a practical orientation, entertainment and presence in many contemporary societies?

On the other hand, are we too hasty in condemning the purely 'historical' attitude to the past to a premature burial? Can traditional academic historiography serve life in ways that have not yet been discussed, or have been overlooked? In short, this conference addresses the questions should we (re)make history in such a way that it can address more 'practical pasts', and if so how?

Although the main focus of this conference is the 'practical past' we also welcome papers on other topics in the field of philosophy and theory of history, including but not limited to:

- ethics of history
- experience/presence
- epistemology
- history as science (causation, explanation, lawfulness, modelling, ...)
- historical time
- hermeneutics
- historical (in)justice
- history and mourning/trauma
- public/popular history
- substantial/speculative philosophy of history
- narrativism
- politics of history and memory
- the relations between history and other scientific fields
- the history of historiography

### **Practical information**

The second INTH network conference will be held in Ouro Preto (Brazil) on 23-26 August 2016 and will be hosted by Sociedade Brasileira de Teoria e História da Historiografia (SBTHH). The goal of this conference is to unite theorists and philosophers of history from around the world by offering a forum for scholars to contact one another, exchange ideas, and share their resources as well as their questions. Please visit the conference website: <http://www.inth.ugent.be/conferences> for further information.

Those interested in taking part in the conference are asked to send in abstracts of 300-500 words to *inthconference@gmail.com* by **December 15th 2015**.

We will consider both proposals for panel sessions as well as individual papers. Panel proposals should preferably include a commentator and a chair.

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The Brazilian Executive Committee:

Prof. Valdei Araujo (Federal University of Ouro Preto); Prof. Julio Bentivoglio (Federal University of Espirito Santo); Prof. André de Lemos Freixo (Federal University of Ouro Preto); Prof. Helena Mollo (Federal University of Ouro Preto); Prof. Marcelo Abreu (Federal University of Ouro Preto);

Assisted by the following PhD students: Rodrigo Machado (PhD Student at Federal University of Ouro Preto); Maria Fernanda Alves (PhD Student at Federal University of Ouro Preto)

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The International Network for Theory of History (INTH):

Berber Bevernage (Ghent University, Belgium), Broos Delanote (KU Leuven, Belgium), Ramses Delafontaine (Ghent University, Belgium), Anton Froeyman (Ghent University, Belgium), Gisele Iecker de Almeida (Ghent University, Belgium), Amanda Martins (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil), Patty Huijbers (Groningen, the Netherlands), Kalle Pihlainen (Åbo Akademi, Finland), Kenan Van De Mieroop (Ghent University, Belgium)