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Sake Elzinga, Frank Ankersmit, 2004.  
Historische Uitgeverij, Groningen.

# Theoretical History

In 2010 various publications took stock of the state of affairs in the field of the Theory and Philosophy of History.<sup>1</sup> In December *History and Theory* brought out an issue with the title *The Next Fifty Years*. In *Rethinking History* (September 2010) Barbara Adams wrote about the ‘History of the Future’, and the Netherlands saw a new textbook by the Nijmegen theoretical historian Harry Jansen, *Triptiek van de tijd. Geschiedenis in drievoud* [Triptych of time: History in triplicate] (2010).

All of the authors pointed out that the basic assumptions underlying the professional study and practice of history had altered radically. These profound changes were explained of course, by the respective cultural, linguistic, spatial and material turns. The influence of the transformation of the world in which historians operate however was judged to be more far-reaching. Many solutions were proposed, all of them entailing engagement and an appeal to escape from Plato’s Cave, variously called entangled history, global history, big history or even universal history.

The editors of *BMGN - LCHR* took the initiative in provoking a discussion on the future of what is known as ‘theoretische geschiedenis’ [theoretical history] in Belgium and the Netherlands. The concept was coined after the Second World War by the Amsterdam historian Jan Romein, who formulated its aims as reflecting on the theory of history as well as contemplating the historical process itself and its development.<sup>2</sup> Romein’s focal point became institutionalised in a genuine discipline/subdiscipline with its own journal, *Theoretische Geschiedenis* (1974-1999), and lecturers and even full professors who specialised in the theory of history guaranteed the subject a secure place in the history curricula at universities. In the 1970s and 1980s debates on scientific history, narrativism, the influence of the social sciences, et cetera were stormy, but since the beginning of the twenty-first century these have died down. Several history departments have even ceased to regard an ‘in-house philosopher’ as vital, for example the Groningen Arts Faculty, which in 2010 refrained from appointing a new professor when the Netherlands’ most famous theoretical historian Frank Ankersmit retired.

*BMGN - LCHR* therefore asked three prominent theoreticians from the Low Countries, Herman Paul, Berber Bevernage and Harry Jansen, each to

devise an outline for the future of their discipline. What legitimacy does Theoretical History have in the Netherlands and Belgium today? What demands must the discipline meet in the coming decades in order not only to survive but to continue to be of value to others, that is non-theoretical historians and history students? Should it confine itself to reflection on the practice of the discipline by demonstrating the fundamentals and value of the practice of history by means of analysis of the argumentation techniques and rhetoric that are applied? Or would it be better and much more interesting if theoreticians of history concerned themselves with the survival of the discipline of history? What are the substantive and the ethical requirements in the practice of history for it to be of continuing value to a 'global society in crisis'?

On behalf of the Editorial Board,

CATRIEN SANTING

- 1 *History and Theory* 49 (2010), Special Issue *The Next Fifty Years*; Barbara Adam, 'History of the Future: Paradoxes and Challenges', *Rethinking History* 14:3 (2010) 361-378, and the Nijmegen theoretician Harry Jansen published a new text book, *Triptiek van de tijd. Geschiedenis in drievoud* (Nijmegen 2010).
- 2 Jo Tollebeek, *De toga van Fruin. Denken over geschiedenis in Nederland sinds 1860* (Amsterdam 1991) 300-301.