

## **Inaugural address as President of the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography**

(At the ICHTH Board Meeting gathering at the Poznań Branch of the Polish Academy of Sciences during the 23rd International Congress of Historical Sciences, Friday 26 August 2022)

Antoon De Baets

Dear colleagues of the Board of the International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography,

I am extremely grateful for the trust you have put in me when you elected me unanimously as your incoming President. It is an honor that befell upon me completely unexpectedly since the idea first arose two months ago. Life is full of surprises and this is surely one of them. After decades of struggling with contingencies, however, I am slowly learning to cope with them. I must say that once I got used to this appealing perspective that suddenly revealed itself, I came to embrace and cherish it in a matter of weeks. Honoré de Balzac once said that great love affairs start with champagne and end with tisane. As for my love affair with history, the opposite is true.

Let my first act as President be to look at the recent past and dedicate a word of farewell to our deceased Board members and deceased honorary Board members: Georg Iggers, Fernando Sánchez Marcos, Eiji Takemura, Richard Vann, and Hayden White. Yesterday we organized a panel to pay tribute to them. A proverb from both Western Africa and South America says: “When elderly people die, a library burns” – and this is surely true here. We still feel bereaved and we will not forget them.

I also want to thank the outgoing Board for its unwavering efforts to steer the Commission through unruly waters. I am thinking in particular of the Board members who leave after years of service and whose imprint on the Commission has been so remarkable: Stefan Berger, Antonis Liakos, Chris Lorenz, Estevão de Rezende Martins, Edoardo Tortarolo, and Q. Edward Wang. I hope that this is not goodbye and that you will be available to counsel us in the years ahead. Personally, I will not hesitate to awaken you from your historiographical slumber when we need your views on our problems and on how these were dealt with in the past.

I am also thinking of the members of the outgoing Board who stay on the ship: Berber Bevernage from Belgium, Dipesh Chakrabarty from India/United States, Effi Gazi from Greece, Marek Tamm from Estonia, Sanjay Seth from India/United Kingdom, Verónica Tozzi from Argentina, and last but certainly not least, outgoing President and ex officio member Ewa Domańska from Poland. Thank you for all your past work and for the energy you muster for another term. We will need your experience every bit along the way.

I warmly welcome the new Board members, just elected by the ICHTH General Assembly: Olufunke Adeboye from Nigeria, Marnie Hughes-Warrington from Australia, Allan Megill from the United States, Daniel Woolf from Canada, and Xupeng Zhang from China. I eagerly hope that you will feel at ease in our Commission and that your work in our midst will bear many fruits.

For this is my deepest wish: that this Board and all the members of the Commission – and by extension all those interested in the history and theory of historiography whoever they are and wherever they live – will thrive and will feel welcome, safe, and understood. I am talking here about the [hedgehogs as well as the foxes](#), to recall a well-known distinction made by Isaiah Berlin, and I am talking here about the [birds as well as the frogs](#), to recall an equally well-known distinction by Freeman Dyson. I hope that all will perceive the Commission as a natural home for their activities in the field. And I see the president of the Commission as a doorkeeper and porter who invites people to come in, to gather, to speak, and to listen.

Indeed, this is the core mission of our Commission, one that prominently figures in the first articles of our [Constitution](#). The flowering of the history and theory of historical writing to advance the knowledge in our field is where our profoundest desire lays. Much impressive, often dazzling, work has been done and is being done. Undoubtedly, this will continue in the future as the persons and circles involved in our field continue to proliferate all over the globe. This overwhelming consensus on our core mission is as amazing as it is indispensable. Because, as Seneca said, if one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable. So yes, our Commission will continue its function as a hub for individual historiographers and theorists, for universities and academies, for international and national journals, networks, platforms, working groups, and conferences and workshops dedicated to our field. I take the opportunity to appeal to all our stakeholders to invite the Commission to cooperate with them. For without

our stakeholders, the Commission is nothing. In fulfilling this never-ending mission we as the newly elected Board stand on the shoulders of our impressive predecessors.

But will we also see further? This depends not only on our efforts to achieve our substantive goals. It also depends on how we manage and take care of our modest infrastructure. For if we are to have a feast of the mind, the body should be fed. Here I see two problems that we should solve and one Achilles heel that we should cure.

The first problem is that we need more money to enlarge our possibilities. Basically this money should come from fees. The second problem is that we need more publicity to make our work better known and more transparency to arouse the interest of our colleagues.

And the Achilles heel of the Commission? I am convinced that it is its membership. The procedure to become a member of the Commission is rather burdensome; it may need reform. Reform in the sense of more flexible admission requirements and reform in the sense of democratization. If our membership increases, our financial situation as well as our visibility and appeal should improve. Not automatically, not immediately, but gradually over time.

And time is the natural ally of historians, is it not? Rome was not built in one day, so we need patience and we may divide our work into stages, laying one brick at the time. Or to use another image, we find ourselves on Theseus's raft: our challenge is to rebuild it while we are navigating. If we all do our part, however small it may be, we can achieve a lot in the end. The result may not be Rome, but it could be a garden on a hilltop, where hedgehogs and foxes, birds and frogs love to dwell. And then the day may come that we are not merely standing on the shoulders of our predecessors, but that we are also looking further. Thank you.