

*Faut-il reconstruire l'université québécoise ?*  
Colloque organisé par la Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs  
d'université (FQPPU), Montréal, 6-7 November 2008

**“IMAGINATION WILL NOT BREED IN CAPTIVITY”**  
**THE NETWORK OF CONCERNED HISTORIANS**  
**AFTER THIRTEEN YEARS**

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In October 1995, the *Network of Concerned Historians* (NCH) was established at the History Department of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, after an important congress for historians here in Montréal. The purpose of the Network was and still is to serve as a small observatory and to provide a bridge between international human-rights organizations campaigning for persecuted historians on the one hand and the global community of historians on the other. During the last thirteen years, the Network has participated in forty such campaigns for cases in countries on all continents. The Network of Concerned Historians also produced fourteen *Annual Reports* about the domain where history and human rights intersect. The most recent *Annual Report*, published last September, contained entries on 83 countries. Currently, 920 historians and others concerned with the past are on the Network list. Two years ago, the Network website (the address of which is <http://www.concernedhistorians.org>) was renovated; it now carries many documents, especially from the United Nations and international courts, relevant to its mandate, many of them in English, French, and Spanish, and frequently also in other languages. For Canada, it contains court judgments of, among others, the case of the Attorney General of Quebec versus the Sioui brothers and of the Cour d'appel de Québec in the Turgeon versus Michaud case. In addition, the Network collects codes of ethics of historians, archivists, and archaeologists from all over the world. For Canada, for example, there are codes of ethics for, among others, the *Association canadienne d'archéologie* and the *Association des archivistes du Québec*. My contribution to this colloquy will explain the Network's origins, operation, and topics, and discuss its impact.

## **Origins**

Originally, the project resulted from three factors. The earliest was my research in the 1980s and 1990s on the postwar censorship of history. Gradually, it dawned upon me that some of the cases of censorship I studied were ongoing still and clearly called for more than research: they also called for action. The second cause was the escalating use of electronic mail in academic milieus since the mid-1990s which facilitated communication with colleagues enormously. The final factor was the fact that the International Congress of Historical Sciences organized a roundtable in 1995 on the crucial subject of “Power, Liberty, and the Work of the Historian.” Immediately after that congress in Montréal, I drafted a short mandate for a *Network of Concerned Historians* and encouraged colleagues to join the initiative. On Friday 13 October 1995, with the help of two colleagues, the website was created. The Network sprang from this informal cooperation. So, it is not an organization but an e-mail and website-based network with no formal structure, no membership in the hard sense, no central offices, no personnel, no budget, no board, and virtually no meetings except occasionally with a friend who hosts the website for free. The Network’s only assets were and are a clear mandate, spare time, email, the Internet, and daily perseverance. Early in 2000, the Network became involved in a UNESCO initiative to establish a network of networks for academic freedom. Consequently, in June 2001 it became one of the founding members of the *Network of Education and Academic Rights* (abbreviated as NEAR), a global watchdog for academic freedom based in London. And since 2003 the Network of Concerned Historians has also had fraternal ties with *Academia Solidaria*, the academic-freedom initiative of the Spanish network *Historia a Debate*. Last year, the Network also became an affiliated member of Scholars at Risk in New York, and this year an affiliated member of the Science and Human Rights Coalition of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington.

## **Operation**

Perhaps the main characteristic of the operation of the Network is its continuity. The mandate has remained basically the same since the inception of the Network. The rhythm of activities has been relatively steady. The operation rests on four principles: universality, impartiality, independence, and distance. While the first three are rather obvious, the last one holds that the Network of Concerned Historians does not

necessarily share the views of historians (and others) mentioned in its circulars. Three tasks are performed on a daily basis: reading and selecting history-related urgent appeals from international human-rights organizations; reading sources for the compilation of the *Annual Reports*; and, finally, the usual network logistics. When campaigns are launched, historians on the Network list are always urged to write appeals in their professional capacity.

### **Persecution**

An interesting question, it seems to me, is whether there is any correspondence at all between the campaigns in which the Network of Concerned Historians has participated and the *real* level of persecution of historians and others concerned with the past. The information of the Network basically comes from two sources: human-rights organizations and historical associations. Until about five years ago, the Network reported only from human-rights organizations but this was not unproblematic. At times, international human-rights organizations did not report about cases of censorship or persecution, either because those fell outside their mandate or because they were simply not noticed. Today, I still come across such cases. At other times, the information from these human-rights organizations was too general to judge its importance for us in time for joining the campaign. Sometimes too, the information was clear enough, but I underestimated its importance. These shortcomings could be repaired partly by reporting about such overlooked cases in a next *Annual Report*. It is my hypothesis, then, that the *accumulated* campaigns and *Annual Reports* of the Network of Concerned Historians give a fair impression of the real situation of the persecution of the historical profession in the world *as far as the cruder and more visible forms are concerned*. As for the less visible types (from harassment to hidden forms of discrimination), our Network's ignorance is huge. Notably, it is underinformed about cases of dismissal—and that is perhaps the most common sanction against historians around the globe.

### **Topics**

Topics regularly featuring in our *Annual Reports* and campaigns can be divided into five groups. The first is, of course, the group of topics directly related to history, that is, to historians, historical research, archives, archaeology, history teaching and textbooks, and to popular history channels such as films, television, theater, novels,

the Internet.... The second group is memory-related, particularly the disturbance of commemorations and the destruction of cultural heritage. The third grasps freedom of information and expression issues: freedom of information and archive laws; archival access and secrecy; and censorship, defamation, and invasion of privacy. The fourth group refers to questions of impunity: where impunity reigns, past crimes continue into the present and delicate questions arise concerning historical injustice, forensic anthropology, truth commissions, and reparations for victims. The final category contains cases of historians who are active in politics, human rights, and journalism. In sum, the topics of the Network are broadly defined and relate to many sensitive past-related subjects.

### **Victims**

Among the victims featuring in the Network campaigns, historians are obviously best represented. Related categories are (in order of importance) forensic anthropologists (they excavate mass graves with evidence of past atrocities and, in so doing, they act as protohistorians), writers (including authors of historical novels), history students, archaeologists, archaeology students, history teachers, archivists, and truth-commission members. Six victims on behalf of whom we worked, enjoyed an international reputation: Guatemalan bishop and truth-commission president Juan Gerardi; Chinese history student Wang Dan, the foremost student leader at Tiananmen Square in 1989; Iranian historian Hashem Aghajari, a close ally of former President Khatami; and Turkish writers Orhan Pamuk and Hrant Dink. All others enjoyed a local or regional reputation. Sadly, sometimes these victims became famous because of their very persecution.

### **Impact**

Finally, I now want to discuss the impact of the Network. The Network of Concerned Historians has an ambiguous status. It is no real organization but mainly a email list of historians and others concerned with the past. Many new persons on the list are added on my own initiative (of course, taking due account of the Internet etiquette). Some people on the list consider themselves members of the Network, many others presumably do not—although they still seem to appreciate that they are informed about the Network activities. Now and then, here and there, the Network is also more. At congresses, colleagues sometimes tell me how much they find the initiative

interesting, needed, important, and so on. And when in early 2007 I invited some twenty famous historians from all over the world to serve as patrons for the Network, all of them agreed within twenty-four hours. Likewise, each successive campaign for a persecuted historian generates a small wave of interest. And sometimes, there is press attention for the campaigns. For example, the History News Network in Washington regularly republishes our campaigns on the Internet.

Thus, the Network is light and flexible, but also small, vulnerable, and without power or authority. Only when its members start writing appeals in their professional capacity, is some influence exerted. It is, however, impossible to determine the extent to which my colleagues and others on the Network list participate in campaigns. Although there are encouraging signs of participation from historians worldwide and although some colleagues participate in every campaign, our impact is difficult to measure. When all is said and done, the impact is probably small and the Network is a long way from constituting an effective weapon. Naturally, it is not alone: it joins and intensifies existing initiatives. Perhaps its prime importance is that it spreads awareness among historians of the difficulties which those concerned with the past must confront. The work of NCH amply demonstrates that the persecution of historians is no thing of the remote past or of distant countries only.

### **Solidarity**

I conclude. Why should we fight for the rights of historians and for the rights of scholars? For three good reasons. The first is solidarity: we should use our freedom on behalf of those to whom it is denied. Our professional rights are meant for *bona fide* historians everywhere, regardless of where they live, in democratic or non-democratic countries, and regardless of who they are, mainstream historians or their opponents. The second reason is self-interest. When our colleagues' right to free expression is in danger, then our own right to information also is, because we are deprived of the rich works which they could have produced had they not been persecuted. In the longer run, our own right to free expression will be damaged as well, for we become obliged to write history on the basis of an impoverished array of information sources. The final reason is that fighting for historians' rights supports the integrity of historical writing and opposes organized forms of oblivion. What George Orwell said more than six decades ago, remains true: "At present," he wrote, "we know only that...imagination...will not breed in captivity."