

Dear Professor Wils,  
Dear colleagues,  
Dear guests,

Ghent University celebrated its bicentennial earlier this academic year; the university was inaugurated at the end of 1817. In comparison with several other European universities, it is still relatively young. Many other European universities have medieval or early-modern origins. Ghent University has, however, gradually developed a sensitivity for its own past. It has gradually started to look upon its own history as the foundation of both current and future projects. The way the university has celebrated its own bicentennial anniversary is indicative of this 'historical turn'. We have been able to visit expositions; we now also dispose of an official history of the university (Deneckere, 2017) and a detailed online encyclopaedia (UGentMemorie). The upcoming establishment of a Museum for the History of Science is another indication of the fact that the university takes its history seriously.

Perhaps one of the first significant indicators of the university's growing interest in its own history was the 'discovery' and celebration of the alumnus George Sarton. As we know, Sarton was born in Ghent in 1884. He graduated in 1906 and received his PhD in 1911 – both from the State University of Ghent. But he did not make a career at the university of his hometown. He spent most of his professional life in the Widener Library at Harvard University in the US. He devoted much time to the journals – *Isis* and *Osiris* – and the association – *History of Science Society* – which he founded (Pyenson, 2007). Especially in the years after the Second World War, when the field of history of science started to expand rapidly, he received significant praise for his lifework. Public recognition of his achievements was shown in many ways. Since 1955, the *History of Science Society* annually awards the George Sarton Medal to an outstanding historian of science. George Sarton himself was the first medalist; he received the medal just a few months before his death. Some thirty years later, in 1984, at the centenary of Sarton's birthday, the State University of Ghent also decided to establish its George Sarton Medal. The first one was awarded in 1986/'87 to Robert Merton, a former student of George Sarton. With Eric Hobsbawm, we might say that this award is an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012). Especially in the last years, however, this tradition has also gained considerable acclaim. It has not only come to play an important part in the public presentation of self of Ghent University. Over the years, the medals have also been awarded to several of the world's leading historians and sociologists of science.

Today we celebrate the work accomplished by Professor Kaat Wils, who is Professor in the History Department at the Catholic University of Leuven. She has written extensively on the history of sociology, especially within Belgium in the decades around 1900. It is, I think, no coincidence that she thus analyzes the period in which George Sarton also came of age in Belgium: the contexts within which Sarton developed his wide-ranging interests partly coincide with the contexts within which sociology took off in the center of Europe (e.g., Wils, 2005; Wils & Rasmussen, 2012). In this context, she has also written about George Sarton himself (e.g., Wils, 2005). The historical analyses of sociology which Kaat Wils has presented are both rigorous and original. In exceptional ways, she is able to combine a detailed mastery of the historical sources with original theoretical insights. Her scholarship, which may be characterized as a cultural history of sociology, challenges the ways sociologists imagine their own history, their own past, in many different ways.

Overall, many of the social sciences have maintained an interest in their own history. Contrary to most natural sciences, the social sciences generally have not abandoned an interest in the history of

their own disciplines. The history of sociology has largely remained a part of the parent discipline; it has not become incorporated into history departments. Within sociology, however, the history of sociology often is defined as a field of teaching, not as a field of research. Much is relegated to textbooks, which focus on the founding fathers, the great books and the classic articles. This history is included in curricula, especially at the Bachelor level, in order to give students a sense of the definition and achievements of the field they have chosen, and to help imagine themselves as heirs to a great tradition. For the last decades, these sociological textbooks have concentrated on what Anthony Giddens and others have called the “Holy Trinity of Sociology”: the lives and works of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. As sociologists or social scientists, we may consider why we appropriate and fetishize our past in this way; it probably has a lot to do with the fact that our disciplinary identity is vague and that it allows us to give a scholarly or theoretical veneer to studies with a predominantly empiricist orientation (Connell, 1997). As historians point out, however, such interests also limit the ways in which historical research about the discipline is conducted. Often research in the history of sociology does not aim at understanding the past on its own terms and in its own context, but rather translates it into the language of the present and present-day concerns.

During the past decades, Kaat Wils has done much to change this picture. She has, for the most part singlehandedly, drafted intriguing pictures of late nineteenth and early twentieth century sociology in Belgium and Europe – not by focusing on the stars, but by analyzing the dynamics of knowledge production, the stakes of the debates over what social science could constitute, the conceptual relations and developments, the networks within which the sociologists operated, the boundaries they tried to establish or overcome, the broader conditions under which they did their work, and so on (e.g., Wils, 2001, 2011; Wils & Rasmussen, 2012). I think that I am not mistaken when I say that her work is still better known among historians than among sociologists. Regrettably, disciplinary boundaries often stand in the way of scholarly communication. But if one looks at the quality of her work on the history of sociology, one is tempted to say that the best institutional position to conduct this kind of historical research is outside sociology. Her work has not always received the sociological attention and credit it deserves, but it is among the very best we currently dispose of.

Let me conclude: Kaat’s work is a source of inspiration and reflection that helps to combat many of the biases with which we are confronted both in the social sciences in general, and in much of the current writings on the history of the social sciences in particular. I am really pleased that both my colleagues of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences and the Sarton Committee of Ghent University were willing to follow my suggestion to award the Sarton Medal for the academic year 2017/2018 to Kaat Wils. The George Sarton Medal might rely on an invented tradition at Ghent University, but I am and we are proud to be able to honour today Prof. Kaat Wils for her outstanding work in the history of the social sciences in general and of sociology in particular.

Raf Vanderstraeten

## References

Connell RW. Why is classical theory classical? *American Journal of Sociology*. 1997; 102(6): 1511-57.

Deneckere G. *Uit de ivoren toren. 200 jaar Universiteit Gent*. Tijdsbeeld; 2017.

Hobsbawm E, Ranger T, editors. *The invention of tradition*. Cambridge University Press; 2012.

Pyenson L. *The passion of George Sarton: A modern marriage and its discipline*. American Philosophical Society; 2007.

Wils K. De sociologie. In *Geschiedenis van de wetenschappen in België, 1815-2000, deel 1* (pp. 305-322). Dexia; 2001.

Wils K. *De omweg van de wetenschap: Het positivisme en de Belgische en Nederlandse intellectuele cultuur, 1845-1914*. Amsterdam University Press; 2005.

Wils K. Everyman his own sociologist. Henri Pirenne and disciplinary boundaries around 1900. *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*. 2011; 41(3-4): 355-80.

Wils K, Rasmussen A. Sociology in a transnational perspective: Brussels, 1890-1925. *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*. 2012; 90(4): 1273-96.