

Judi Rever and the academic principles

This month, the Rwandan genocide denier, Judi Rever, gave lectures at Flemish universities without an expert response. How does this fit within the academic principles of truth and honesty?

By Jos van Oijen

"The principles of truth and honesty are considered as fundamental to a community of scholars." This motto can be found on the website of the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium, one of the universities where the Canadian journalist Judi Rever from October 9 through October 12 was allowed to explain her revisionist theories about the genocide against the Tutsis. This is ironic, because very few Rwanda experts characterize her work as 'true' or 'honest'.

Rwanda experts

Bringing Rever into an academic environment caused a stir in the field. Within two days, sixty genocide experts from around the world, ranging from eyewitnesses such as General Romeo Dallaire to prominent historians such as H  l  ne Dumas, as well as organizations for the prevention of genocide, had already expressed their concerns in a joint letter to the Rectores Magnifici:

"[Judi Rever] ... provides not the slightest evidence of her sensationalist accusations, whilst ignoring a wealth of testimony and accessible material," the experts wrote. "Evidence built up over the past 25 years by scholars and journalists."

Other specialized scientists chose to vent their protest on social media. Bert Ingelaere, himself working at the University of Antwerp, one of the locations Rever would visit on her tour, published tweets with links to scientific publications that criticize Rever's work and ideas, concluding:

"And, yes, given the above, I find it completely un-academic and thus irresponsible to have Judi Rever speak on this at universities without also organizing an academic counter-voice that does not share the premise of what is defended and how that is being defended."

The well-known French historian and Rwanda expert Claudine Vidal agreed: "From the point of view of university research, there is much to be said about Judi Rever's book. It is incomprehensible that a university should invite her without confronting her with this criticism. Fully agree with Ingelaere."

The criticism did not come as a surprise, as Rever's version of history strongly resembles the stories we've been hearing for 30 years from the extremists who prepared, executed and subsequently denied the genocide in Rwanda. Would these universities consider putting an anti-vaxxer (ant-vaccination activist, ed.), climate denier or holocaust sceptic in front of their students and guests without facilitating an expert response? That doesn't seem likely.

Core business

For the experts, Rever's sensational claims are not new. They come along every few years, wrapped in a different package. And each time again the details can easily be traced back to extremist publications from the 90s. But for those who know little or nothing about the genocide - like the organizers of the lectures in Flanders - those stories seem new and revealing.

Before the first lecture had taken place, the events had already gone awry. The announcements placed by the universities of Antwerp and Leuven on their websites and distributed via social media, largely consisted of a promotional text supplied by Rever's publisher, which was entirely made up of inaccurate claims. The fact that it was an advertising text was not mentioned, or had not been recognized as such by the co-organizers who had signed it.

At Leuven, no fewer than four professors signed the advertisement. In doing so, they erroneously suggested - with little respect for the principles of truth and honesty - that the text contained credible information. Moreover, inquiries revealed that the signing process itself had not taken place very carefully either.

Arnim Langer, one of the four signatories, informed me by email that he was not involved in the organization at all and his research did not involve Rwanda. Marc Hooghe, another signatory, is not a Rwanda expert either, but does have some notoriety for having been reprimanded several times for scientific misconduct. Why he is still a professor at all is not clear.

Law professor Stephan Parmentier acted as the spokesperson. Although he is well-regarded, Parmentier does not specialize in Rwanda either.

The fourth 'professor' is former TV reporter Peter Verlinden. On Twitter, he revealed that it was his initiative to organize Rever's tour. Verlinden's involvement explains a lot. Although he is the only one among the organizers who is familiar with Rwanda, he does not stand out as someone who takes facts very seriously.

Verlinden regularly publishes the most absurd claims without providing a decent source. He has, for example, reported a huge massacre in Rwanda that no one else has heard about, and that seven out of ten Interahamwe (the Hutu militia responsible for a large part of the genocide) would have been Tutsis - a suggestion that fits in with the extremist propaganda which suggests that the Tutsis collectively committed suicide.

For twenty-five years Verlinden has searched for evidence of a second genocide in Rwanda, to no avail. So when Judi Rever's book arrived, he received it as a gift from above. Since then, promoting Rever and her book, together with slandering her critics, seems to have become Verlinden's core business.

Straying professors

This is where we get to the heart of when things tend to go wrong. When professors stray from their area of expertise they are basically laymen, just like a regular person. If they overlook this fact, they become vulnerable to manipulation by trained and experienced communication experts with a hidden agenda, such as Verlinden and Rever. For unsuspecting students, journalists or politicians who assume that professors will always know what they are doing, it is difficult to imagine such a reality.

In the Netherlands we also have examples of errant professors underestimating the complexities of the 1994 genocide and related matters, who have been getting it wrong in a spectacular fashion. A classic example is an open letter published in the *NRC* newspaper addressed to then Justice Secretary Fred Teeven, about a group of genocide suspects tracked down in the Netherlands. Several non-specialized professors had been persuaded to sign the piece.

Because these learned gentlemen had added their official academic positions, they created the false impression that the letter conveyed important scientific knowledge. In reality, however, the information in the publication came from ordinary media reports which, as has since been established in a series of court cases, turned out to be incorrect. Yet serious errors in the document have influenced public opinion for years.

The misleading text in that case, just like the advertising text and the Rever lectures in the present, raised questions about the academic 'truth and honesty' principles. Were no regulations for ethical conduct in place, or a National Organization for Scientific Integrity (LOWI)? But when asked, the LOWI stated that the code of conduct does not apply in such cases. Ethics only apply to university research. Whatever scientists do otherwise, even if it's spreading fake news in the media, is their own business.

Plagiarism and disinformation

Even concrete cases of integrity breaches, such as plagiarism, are acceptable according to this philosophy. Earlier this year, I discovered such an example at Ghent University (UGent). Patrick van Damme, a professor of tropical plant cultivation, had written a review of a book about the genocide - not his specialty. To solve his ignorance problem, more than half his article was made up of text copied from other authors, including myself. And to make matters worse, the professor had added some bizarre mistakes in between.

The Committee on Scientific Integrity (CWI) of UGent couldn't see a problem. The fact that Van Damme's article was published in *Afrika Focus*, a specialised journal of the university, was deemed irrelevant. The CWI's logic was similar to that of the LOWI. Van Damme's article was not about university research, so despite plagiarism and disinformation, it wasn't covered by the code of ethics. It qualified as 'opinion' and 'scholarly debate', categories in which freedom of expression applies.

"Debate" and "freedom of expression" were also the magic words in the Rever case to circumvent the 'truth and honesty' principles. "The core of this event lies in the contradictory debate," co-organizer Parmentier informed me via email, "based on sound arguments and without prejudice, within an academic context."

On the website of his faculty, Parmentier explained who he considered most suitable for this job: himself and Johan Swinnen, Belgium's ambassador before the genocide. In practice, therefore, nothing came of a debate. According to Parmentier, the offending advertising text was only a rough sketch that would be modified according to my substantive corrections. But those changes never saw the light of day.

The contact at the University of Antwerp dealing with ethical issues, philosophy professor Willem Lemmens, refused to respond altogether to questions about the advertising text and the absence of an expert to challenge Rever's ideas in what he described as "a discussion lecture". He did, however, express his personal opinion: "Like every citizen in the free western world, Judi Rever has the right to speak and be heard." A superfluous remark as none of the critical experts denied her that right.

Lemmens further noted that he saw no reason to doubt the expertise of Rever and Verlinden. In doing so, he fell into the same trap as Parmentier and the other non-specialized professors. After all,

it is pointless to just assume something about a field of expertise one is not familiar with, especially when ignoring the experts who do question the expertise of the aforementioned journalists.

"Intellectual prostitutes"

Judi Rever is not an expert, even though Peter Verlinden works very hard to create that impression by claiming she spent twenty years researching her book. But according to her own words, provided to Belgian newspaper *Het Belang Van Limburg* in 2015 and to a French radio station a year earlier, she had started researching for her book in 2012 or early 2013. Before that time, she had published only one relevant article: an interview for Agence France Presse in 2010 with Luc Côté, about a United Nations investigation into war crimes in the Congo.

The preparations for her book *In Praise of Blood*, published last year, began by reaching out to the Rwandan Diaspora in Belgium, including political rivals of President Kagame, such as Faustin Twagiramungu, a former prime minister. These people, she writes in her book, helped her by putting her in touch with informers. In the course of 2013, she began publishing her first articles about Rwanda, after Twagiramungu had provided her with a bundle of documents during a visit to Canada.

Reliable sources, which after twenty-five years of academic and judicial research are abundantly available, also to Rever - she has hardly consulted. She forgot to verify the information she received from her informants, even though it often conflicts with the results of forensic research, with other witness statements and with practical considerations.

In addition to the recycled propaganda I have already referred to, this one-sided, naive approach has still yielded some useful observations and witness statements, but after substantive analysis, much of the factual information turns out to be simply unrealistic, or even impossible from a purely technical point of view.

The apparently obsolete 'truth and honesty' principles would dictate that a contradictory debate aims to separate facts from fantasy. But now the lectures only polarized, with on the one hand the congregation of believers made up of Rever's and Verlinden's fans, including the non-specialized professors who could not come up with a relevant question - and on the other hand the experts who, after years of study may not be impeccable either, but did accumulate sufficient knowledge of the subject matter to be able to say something meaningful about it.

Rever and Verlinden couldn't care less. Verlinden sarcastically thanked the critics on Twitter for their help in generating extra attention for the book, revealing the real motives behind his initiative. And Rever enjoyed herself by insulting critical scientists such as Bert Ingelaere and by quoting an article by Patrick Mbeko, a notorious genocide denier, in which the Rwanda experts were portrayed as "... intellectual prostitutes in the service of a sickening cause." In other words: paid by Kagame - the standard accusation by people who ran out of arguments a long time ago.

My question to the organisers as to whether this was the kind of debate they had had in mind when they decided to invite Rever remained unanswered.

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