



Some personal insights into the International Conference in commemoration of Roger Blanpain: “Game Changers in Labour Law - Shaping the Future of Work” (3-4 November 2017, Leuven, Belgium)

by Michele Tiraboschi

I have recently returned to Leuven, Belgium to take part in a lovely conference organised in remembrance of Professor Roger Blanpain on the first anniversary of his passing.

As many as 25 years have gone by since my stay in this city. I spent a year doing research here under the supervision of Prof Blanpain at the labour law centre he founded. This was all thanks to an idea of Prof Marco Biagi, whom I had gotten to know thanks to Prof. Stefano Liebman, the charismatic professor who had mentored me at Milan’s Università Statale. At the time I was too young – probably not entirely foolish, but certainly green, introverted and a bit naïve – to fully appreciate the significance of this experience, which in those years only a few young academics had the opportunity to enjoy, especially in Italy.

After 25 years, and thanks to this meaningful conference, I have better understood what I learnt during my stay in Leuven. I am not only referring to comparative analysis – which still constitutes the basis of my research – or to the legal effectiveness of the collective agreement over time, a topic that nobody covered in those years. I left Leuven with something even more precious: I had learnt how to be a man.

A number of speakers at this conference – among others, Roger Blanpain’s pupil, Frank Hendrickx – stressed that Prof Blanpain’s most remarkable quality was his talent in bringing together people to work on collective projects such as academic publications, international conferences, and legislative reforms. I would go further and add that his intelligence and peculiarity lied within his ability to connect people with differing opinions and views. Unlike many of us, Roger Blanpain would look forward to hearing from people whose thoughts were different from his, even when they seemed to be worlds apart. Roger Blanpain believed that this was the only way to better understand and challenge one’s own convictions. Of course, this should take place in a serious and respectful way, as dealing with multiple views is something that should be defended at all costs, even if this means questioning our own ideas.

This is precisely what I learnt 25 years ago, when I understood the meaning of “freedom”, “freedom of opinion”, “mutual respect”, and the “courage to make choices”, which always call for loyalty, responsibility, and good faith. I am therefore honoured to have been invited to an international conference where all speakers share these values. I am also grateful to have been given the opportunity to remember Roger Blanpain along with many other friends, each respecting the others’ opinions, however different they may be.

If truth be told, this invitation to contribute to Prof Blanpain’s commemorations came rather unexpectedly. A number of years ago, I made some decisions – in terms of academic choices,

cultural stances and values – in relation to the academic legacy and views of my master, Prof Marco Biagi. The choices I made were painful and controversial, and gave rise to misunderstandings that negatively affected some personal relationships I had in Modena. I am truly sorry and there is no doubt that I had my share of responsibility for this. However, in making these choices, I followed my heart and my mind. I acted with loyalty, remaining faithful to the values I was taught and learned from complex dynamics resulting from some upsetting events. These dynamics are difficult to explain and will certainly be a part of my memoirs and other documents at the end of my academic career. What I can tell now, is that I have always acted in good faith, although this has entailed making uncomfortable choices – starting from nothing and paying the full costs of my actions.

Thanks to the teachings of the great masters I have met in my life – like my father, and in academia, Roger Blanpain – I had the courage to make these choices and bear the consequences resulting from my decisions. They taught me foundational values, like respecting the opinions of others and sticking to what we believe is right, defending it no matter what and without having to reach pointless compromises to get by.

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