

In Memoriam: Roger Blanpain (1932–2016)

On 11 October 2016, shortly before his 84th birthday, the renowned Belgian scholar Roger Blanpain passed away,

Roger had played a key role in the establishment of this *International Journal*, and for over thirty years served as a member of its International Advisory Board. Indeed, at the Madrid dinner gathering in 1984 which conceived the project,¹ it was Roger who uttered the ‘fateful proposition’ that, ‘What we need is an international journal to air all these things.’ So, too, was the *Journal*’s compendious title adopted at his suggestion.

Roger Blanpain’s sparkle, drive, curiosity and provocations will be sorely missed by friends and colleagues around the World in the fields of comparative labour law and industrial relations. We extend our condolences to his widow, Lina, and to his large and close-knit family who share his loss.

Having studied Law in the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, and obtained his doctorate there in 1956, Roger Blanpain moved to New York, where he obtained a Master of Arts degree at Columbia University. In 1961, he returned to Leuven to take up a first teaching appointment, at what was to be the start of a long and illustrious academic career.

When he was eventually elevated to his position as the holder of the Chair of Labour Law at Leuven – a post which he held until his retirement in 1998 – Roger set about making that Chair into what he liked to describe as a kind of ‘Mecca’ for young students and scholars. In the spirit of such pilgrimage, they would flock to Leuven in huge numbers to profit from Roger’s unique knowledge of international, comparative and European Labour Law. As a result, many of the international scholars of today owe much in their careers to Roger Blanpain. Indeed, when, in the title of his *Memoirs*,² Roger asked ‘What can I do for you?’, this in no way amounted to a merely rhetorical question. It was the motto for his life – a life dedicated to sharing his knowledge and seeking to support others.

¹ See, Guest Editorial: *Reflections on Discovering That the International Journal Has Attained Its Thirtieth Birthday*, 30 Intl. J. Comp. Lab. L. & Indus. Rel. 383 (2014).

² *Memoirs of Roger Blanpain: ‘What can I do for you?’* (Bruges 2009) – the English-language version of his original *Memoires Roger Blanpain: ‘Wat kan ik voor u doen?’*, published the previous year.

Nor was it only young scholars who came to profit from Roger's knowledge and support. Over the years, he afforded the opportunity for many of his peers to teach and to spend time undertaking research in Leuven. Meanwhile, as a dedicated teacher, Roger held the status of Visiting Professor in numerous universities around the world, while, after his retirement from the Chair in Leuven, he continued teaching in The Netherlands, at the University of Tilburg, until very recently.

The fields of international and comparative Labour Law and industrial relations served not simply as areas of intellectual interest and stimulation for Roger. He was particularly noted for his enthusiasm to work collaboratively with fellow scholars, and was renowned for the close and lasting personal relationships which he forged with so many colleagues across a range of related disciplines. The organization and leadership of innumerable collaborative research projects characterized Roger's particular contribution to his specialist fields, and his passion to draw together scholars of the highest calibre underlay the high esteem in which he was held by the scholarly community. A mark of that esteem can be seen in the fact that, during the course of his career, Roger was elected, and enjoyed notable success, as President of both the *International Society of Labour Law and Social Security* (ISLLSS) and the *International Industrial Relations Association* (IIRA).³

Roger's approach was interdisciplinary, integrating the realities and dynamics of industrial relations and of the labour market into Labour Law. His vision extended far beyond 'the Law in the books', and was always solidly rooted in practice, regarding his academic work as a contribution to the improvement of working life 'in the real world', and, thereby, to the promotion of Social Justice.

For much of his career Roger served as an expert for various international organizations – in particular, for the Commission of the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) – and it is hard to underestimate the contribution which he has made to the development of European law in a larger perspective. As well as being intimately involved in the elaboration of a number of Directives, one of his most significant contributions came from his efforts to pave the way for elaborating the fundamental social rights now set out in the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*.

Yet, it is the remarkable volume of books and articles produced by Roger Blanpain over the years that will stand as his abiding legacy. Just how extensive a list of publications he had generated was put into perspective in 1998, when, in the

³ Since renamed the *International Labour and Employment Relations Association* (ILERA).

Liber Amicorum published in his honour,⁴ the longest chapter by far was the section setting out Roger's list of publications.

Roger was also an outstanding organizer of large-scale scholarly publications. His innovative *International Encyclopaedia for Labour Law and Industrial Relations* has since been extended into the gargantuan project for the *International Encyclopaedia of Laws*. Meanwhile, for more than forty-five years, his *Bulletin of Comparative Labour Relations* (by now running to over ninety volumes) has provided a forum and outlet for presenting focused discussions between scholars from different countries on a range of topical technical issues. The contributions to many of these *Bulletins* have been the outcome of conferences organized by Roger himself – reflecting once again his success in attracting and working with groups of scholars from many countries and with widely differing backgrounds. Nor should one overlook the major international conferences which have taken place under his leadership, including the *8th World Congress of the International Industrial Relations Association* in 1989, the *4th Regional European Congress of the International Society for Labour Law and Social Security* in 1993, and the *World Law Conference: 'Law in Motion'* in 1996.

Roger Blanpain was one of the truly 'Big Beasts' of international and comparative Labour Law and industrial relations. His entertaining and provocative interjections at international conferences around the world demonstrated his stature as a knowledgeable, thoughtful and creative opinion-leader on the global stage. At the same time, as a committed champion for global Social Justice, he was not afraid to engage in controversy, fiercely guarding his independence of thought and intellectual integrity, at a time when such qualities have not always been accorded the respect which they are due. Perhaps, above all else, it is Roger Blanpain's independent, critical, always scholarly-based, and uncompromising approach to promoting social rights and the fundamental human values of 'Decent Work' that we should cherish in his memory.

With the passing of Roger Blanpain, we have lost a giant in our field of research and teaching, a warm human being, and a good friend.

Alan C. Neal
Manfred Weiss

⁴ *Labour Law and Industrial Relations at the Turn of the Century: Liber Amicorum in Honour of Prof. Dr. Roger Blanpain* (C. Engels & M. Weiss eds, The Hague: Kluwer Law International 1998).