

## VICE-CHANCELLOR'S BOOK AWARD

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour of presenting to you  
**Dr Leonhard Praeg,**  
Senior Lecturer  
in the Department of Political and International Studies,

for the **Vice-Chancellor's Book Award.**

One of the core purposes of a University is to produce new knowledge that enhances humanity's understanding of the natural and social worlds.

The Vice-Chancellor's Book Award seeks to recognize a recent book published by a staff member, that advances knowledge and understanding, and also brings undoubted credit to the University by virtue of the contribution it makes to scholarly literature, or the discipline within which it is authored.

Dr Praeg's research interests include African Philosophy, Complexity Theory, Continental Theorists, and the discourse on terror. He has built a scholarly track record of books, chapters, research articles and reviews covering these topics. Recent work on ubuntu and terror reflects his concern with situating philosophical discourse in a post-colonial, African context. He also has a celebrated record as a teacher, and is a past recipient (2006) of the Vice-Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching award.

In July 2007, SUN Press<sup>1</sup> published Praeg's book ***THE GEOMETRY OF VIOLENCE***, a 174 page piece of original research on post-colonial violence in Africa, as evidenced in acts of genocide, necklace murders, and familicide. It is a book that has attracted acclaim and admiration, both from colleagues and from unsolicited scholarly reviewers, and is the reason he is standing before you today to receive this award.

To refer to this book as a serious work is a notable understatement. In nominating it for the Vice-Chancellor's Award, a close colleague observed that "there will be no comfortable encounter with this text, both because of its 'relentlessly interrogating philosophical' style, and the topic, violence, that it covers."

The comments of a second nominating colleague appear on the book's back cover. She writes:

"This essay breaks new ground in a number of important respects and brings to the field fresh insights. The analysis of the similarity between the three forms of post-colonial violence is nuanced and revealing, and shows how a complex thread can be weaved between them. I don't believe that many readers will have encountered anything like the insight this brings to the study of violence in Africa. I found it illuminating, fresh and fascinating. Quite beautifully written – mercifully free of pretension but literate and invigorating."

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<sup>1</sup> Stellenbosch University Press, <http://www.sun-e-shop.co.za>

The selection committee was especially swayed by the high praise of studied reviews external to the university.

One such reviewer<sup>2</sup> describes it as “an important book” in which “the scholarship is handled deftly”, and further observes that “The insights gained leave no option but to rethink the manifestation of violence fundamentally”.

Another reviewer<sup>3</sup> writes that “This publication is definitely one of the most important philosophical contributions on the topic to emerge out of the context and concerns of South Africa, and one which speaks to a global audience nevertheless”.

The same reviewer provides an insight into the nature of this book with the following passage:

"One of the most important aspects of Praeg's approach is his consistent insistence on the complicity of the 'reader' of this kind of violence within the violence itself: the reader of the violence is being read, and critically. From the start, his text problematizes the 'shocked' observer, the 'outraged' spectator of these forms of violence, the one who refuses to try to understand this violence from the perspective of the perpetrator, and who tries to distance and purify himself, his history, his state, 'culture' or 'civilisation' from this type of violence. For insisting that all instances of state formation are violent, that all modern states are founded upon violence, and that the very human rights order of the West was born out of this type of excessive violence, and that it is even today sustained through this type of violence, Praeg uses notions provided by Girard, Derrida and Benjamin. To project the use of excessive violence onto 'backward', 'primitive' Africa, is in itself a kind of purifying or scapegoating violence which 'cannot but produce an expedient exceptionalism which legitimizes all forms of condemnation, stereotypes of backwardness, barbarity and under-development' (p.13), and of course, racism."

So, Mr Chancellor, to return to the words of the first nominating colleague, “Dr Praeg has brought a sharp and informed theoretical eye to bear on the unfolding path of history. This is the stuff of the political philosopher's calling and, with this work, Praeg has catapulted himself into the top of these ranks in South Africa. ***THE GEOMETRY OF VIOLENCE*** is a book of which this university can be enormously proud - intellectual, well-written, relevant, and roundly applauded by serious-minded critics.”

Mr Chancellor, I request you to award the **2009 Vice-Chancellor's Book Award** to **Dr Leonhard Praeg**.

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<sup>2</sup> Publisher's reviewer.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Louise du Toit of the University of Johannesburg, writing in Philosophical Papers 38(2) 2009.