



History @ Erasmus

# Histories of Encounters

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# Preface

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In 1978, the “experimental” History of Society programme was launched in Rotterdam, an initiative of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Erasmus University. Unlike in other Dutch universities, this programme was not embedded in a humanities faculty because Erasmus University did not have one, and still does not. This was what made the programme experimental as, contrary to the rest of the Netherlands, history in Rotterdam was viewed as a social science, or at least a study that needed to be approached from the social and economic sciences.

Elsewhere in the Netherlands, some watched the Rotterdam experiment expectantly while others dismissed it from the start. Traditional historical scholarship in the Dutch context was based on, among other things, a Eurocentric periodisation and an emphasis on synchrony, elements that were not present in the History of Society programme. In its stead were new conventions such as a typology of societies and a more diachronic approach. Our aim then was to differentiate between various models of societies in world history which were not necessarily consecutive in time, and could –or still can – exist alongside each other and be studied by comparing them to one another. These types of societies were given names which were completely different from traditional categories, such as the History of Pre-Agricultural Societies (focusing on hunters and gatherers), the History of Agricultural-Urban Societies, and the History of Industrial Societies. The most interesting perhaps of all the new categories, and the most difficult to explain, was Agricultural-Metropolitan Societies, or AgMet. This described mainly non-Western societies in which agricultural, pre-industrial and urban structures existed simultaneously while usually being linked to a Western colonial metropolis.

Because most lecturers and researchers had been educated in a tradition of chronological periods, this approach proved to be

challenging to put into practice. Internationally as well the traditional European division of history into Ancient, Medieval and Modern time periods introduced at the end of the seventeenth century dominated to such an extent that its influence was difficult to avoid. For many people, types of society still corresponded with the more familiar periodization of history. The Eurocentric element was mainly overcome by the full recognition of AgMet, later renamed as the History of Non-Western Societies (GNWS). However, this term brought with it its own problems because it mainly described what it was not and simplistically lumped together everything outside Europe.

The Rotterdam experiment brought another new aspect to historical scholarship in the Netherlands: a concerted theoretical reflection and a focus on mentalities and cultural history. By using anthropology and social psychology alongside the term group cultures, this approach came close to that used in the social sciences. Furthermore, the study of history in Rotterdam focused on the media such as film, radio and television as a subject and as an alternative to writing a thesis. Students were allowed to graduate with radio and film documentaries as their final project, a feature which gave a boost to the programme's popularity. It could even be argued that the current Media and Communications programme in today's faculty, the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC), had its roots in the media emphasis of the History of Society programme. The vocational graduation variants in the field of communications and information, policy, management, education and research also increased the focus on society and thus its popularity among students. In all senses of the word, the History of Society programme was truly experimental.

Now, forty years later, not much seems to remain of the former programme. Within this period, many major and minor reorganisations, changes and expansions have taken place. In the 1980s, universities were confronted with the so-called SKG operation (Selective Growth and Decrease). Rotterdam now had to leave various parts of the history programme to Leiden while other emphases would come to Rotterdam. While this change did not come to pass, the budget cuts certainly did, resulting in changes such as the History of Pre-Agricultural and Agricultural Societies disappearing from the curriculum. In the 1990s, the History of Society spawned the new Arts and Cultural Studies (KCW) programme. This was an almost immediate success, sometimes even threatening to expand at the expense of the History programme. At the same time, the semester system was also replaced by a four-module system. The types of society approach was gradually pushed to the background. For example, the History of Non-Western Societies (formerly AgMet) was

replaced by the more common term World History and the History of Pre-Industrial Societies chair became the Early Modern History chair.

A massive change took place in 2001 when Europe decided to introduce the bachelor-master degree structure. History of Society was replaced by a bachelor programme in History and a master programme still called History of Society but which had very little in common with the original concept originating in 1978. Fast forward to 2009 and the Arts and Culture Studies department was transformed into Culture Studies with a third faculty department being founded: Media and Communication. In 2013, History, now itself a department of the new ESHCC faculty, encountered financial difficulties and had to embark on yet another reorganisation. This resulted in the removal of the Early Modern History chair. As a consequence, pre-seventeenth century history is now hardly studied or taught in our department. Crucially, this latest reorganisation raised a fundamental question: who are we now as a history programme? Is there actually still a typical Rotterdam profile? Our overwhelming response to the latter question is yes, and this is shown by our new History programme curriculum and the joint formulation of our research profile, History @ Erasmus, which is included in this publication and which we hope also answers the first question.

The current curriculum still includes several pillars from the early years of the programme, such as the prominent place of the theory of history and the focus on much more than just the Western world, including post-colonial perspectives. The long-term perspective is also characteristic of the Rotterdam approach. However, the emphasis now tends to be on history after 1750 and more attention is devoted to the place of the Netherlands in a global context. This also reflects the interests of our students, past and present, whose research mainly focuses on more recent periods (see also chapter by Adriaansen). In both education and research, questions from the present tend to be key and often broad historical lines are followed. We mainly choose subjects which go beyond the national angle and focus on the interaction between local and global levels and any changes or continuities which are associated with that. Many courses are therefore given from an inter- or a transnational or even global perspective. There are now three permanent chairs. The Economic History and International Relations chair demonstrates the strong connections with the international dynamics of the port city and the origins of Erasmus University. The Global History and Cultural Encounters chair is logically a more cultural chair, focusing on historic interactions at all levels between the micro-local, global and macro-global. The third chair is Theory and Methods of History, one of the very first pillars of Rotterdam's history programme. Here, historical-philosophical reflection takes place and attention is given to historical culture in

a broad sense, the past as dealt with in an academic and popular manner. The programme also has several special and/or more personal chairs in the fields of urban history, heritage, business history, migration history and large historical databases.

Our recent History @ Erasmus research profile (see below) shows that the types of society approach has completely disappeared. Now there are words like 'global encounters', 'micro' and 'macro' research, 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches. The nation state is just one of the many levels on which history is studied in Rotterdam and certainly not the leading unit of analysis. This is also evident from the diverse contributions which are included in this compilation. Based on the History @ Erasmus joint profile, we asked researchers in History to write a short contribution about the type of research they are doing. Most of the contributions present a clear historical case or piece of empirical theory which is illustrated through the accompanying visualisation in the form of a map, table, photo or print. The cases vary from an Iroquois Wampum belt to Dutch shipbuilding, from the World Cup Football to sixteenth-century Gelderland, from Syrian holy places to war games, urban history, fashion industry and body decoration. All together these contributions comprise a wonderful mosaic. The aim of this volume is to demonstrate the connections in the Rotterdam history mosaic through all its different shades. In order to make these connections clearer, we have grouped the contributions into three themes. The first theme, comprising parts 1, 2 and 3, shows the different levels of interaction on which we work and are named "Global Networks", "Regional Dynamics" and "Local Narratives" respectively. The second theme addresses and reflects on the question of how history is currently used, and is described in part 4 as "History in the Present." Through each and every contribution in this book a glimmer or more explicit reference can be discerned of the key tenets of the History @ Erasmus profile which is our third theme: encounters and interaction, top-down and bottom-up movements and a theoretically-informed study of history.

This compilation is bilingual; some contributions are in English and some in Dutch. This reflects both the two most commonly used publication languages among our researchers and the two languages used to teach the programme. English is the language used by most researchers in international fora and in which lectures are given in the international lecture hall. Dutch remains the primary language for some subjects and for students aiming at a career in the Netherlands. This also applies to many of the popular scientific activities targeting a much larger national audience.

There has never been a dull moment in the last forty years. The History department has gradually created a new identity, emerging

from its former self, through which we constantly address current and future challenges while always bringing our own unique colour pallet to the mosaic of historical science in the Netherlands and beyond. We are therefore already looking forward to the ideas which will be presented at our fifty-year anniversary in ten years' time.

Finally, we would like to commemorate our colleagues whom we have lost while working with us or shortly after retiring, in particular professor Huib Vleesenbeek, drs. Christi Boerdam, drs. Tineke Gossens and most recently dr. Ferry de Goey and dr. Bert Altena.

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