



# **The Erasmian Way?**

Integrating Historical Analysis with  
Contemporary Challenges

*By Dr. Daniel Curtis*

It is an honor to provide one of the first submissions to a new journal that is a truly student-led initiative—especially when the goal of the journal is to encourage new dialogues on the historical dimensions of marginalization and vulnerability. This links up very closely with my own research interests on aspects of “hidden” or “obscured inequalities” across time, which I try to bring across in the classroom. Given that it is also an Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) history initiative, in this short contribution, I intend to elaborate on some of the major facets of the “Erasmian Way” of “doing history”, how it relates to some of the current trends with regard to the increased prominence of fields such as “Applied History”, and some of the potential pitfalls that we might also try to avoid in our future research and educational strategies connected to this domain.

In my view, at EUR we try to write and teach a “problem-oriented” history. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the foundations of the department go back to an identity of “maatschappijgeschiedenis” (literally, history of societies), and the department has, and still, integrates itself closely within various social and cultural institutions in the city of Rotterdam itself.<sup>1</sup> Problems and challenges within contemporary society are at the center of our historical approaches—thus, issues connected to inequality, vulnerability, exclusion, the representation and appropriation of the past, globalization, the application and resistance to power, citizenship, and much more. That is not the same as simply applying contemporary terms to the past—leading to potential accusations of “presentism” or “anachronistic” thinking. Instead, we use our training as historians to assess these

concepts within very specific historical contexts, and to consider whether and how they apply, and whether they change or stay constant over time. Thus, in my teaching, I encourage students to think critically about the meaning, understanding, and application of the term “inequalities” for different societies as we go back into the past. Of course, we can use historical sources to calculate different kinds of measurements for distribution of economic resources going far back in time, but how those societies thought about, perceived, and understood that distribution is not necessarily equivalent to our conceptions today—and thus the meaning of any numbers we produce also differs considerably depending on historical context. In effect, we use the past to problematize these contemporary concepts. Furthermore, while we are interested in the link between the past and the present, it seems clear to me that history cannot directly “solve” contemporary problems. Instead, as the current issues of COVID-19 or exposure to global food price spikes or epistemic isolation show, historical analysis allows us to assess these problems in a new light, from different angles, relativizing processes and outcomes, and offers escape from myopia and short-term thinking.

One thing we need to be careful of in this approach is seeing the role of history as a kind of “guidebook”—something where we can draw clear “lessons” from the past. As a historian with expertise in society-epidemic interactions, I was in the beginning phases of the COVID-19 outbreak at first dismayed to see the public narratives on the social impact of the disease dominated by those outside the domains of the social sciences and humanities, but then second, the initial

(delayed) responses from historians on the subject also tended to be highly lackluster—instead providing sometimes dubious and often unoriginal statements as to whether COVID-19 was or was not like the Black Death or the Great Influenza, and whether we might “learn” from those experiences. In fact, as my research team and I already stated, COVID-19 likely had more analytical value moving in the opposite direction—shining new light on aspects of obscured inequalities and vulnerabilities that had been less foregrounded in historical treatment of epidemic disease.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, in my view, we need to make sure that “problem-oriented” historical approaches do not become shorthand for simply a series of cherry-picked analogies across time. Although the field of Applied History is becoming increasingly visible (as it was previously widely resisted in the mainstream of the historical disciplines),<sup>3</sup> it seems to me that a predominant focus still remains on the selection of interesting or “relevant” analogous developments between past and present.<sup>4</sup> Often it is difficult to see beyond “they did it differently in the past”, or “this thing that we see today has already been done in the past”. A proper methodological discussion of exactly how we apply history (in different ways) to contemporary issues is somehow missing, despite the initial steps taken a few years ago with the provocative *The History Manifesto*.<sup>5</sup> Path dependency, of course, should be one of the most relevant concepts—identifying the exact reasons why institutions, systems, and aspects of cultural values are sometimes difficult to shift, and how they in turn affect societies further down the line—as that is an explicit linking of past and present. However, this is not an

approach first developed in Applied History, but in strands of neo-institutionalist literature already at the center of the mainstream of social and economic history.<sup>6</sup> My criticism of Applied History remains—what is so different from that which we are already doing? Surely these are just a basic set of general principles of proper analytical history widely seen and adhered to across sub-fields of the discipline that are already being implemented? I am, of course, always willing to be convinced.

In arguing for the “value of history” for the present, I tend to emphasize two key methodological aspects to students (accepting, of course, that these are not the “only” ways of doing history). First, I emphasize that the historical record, despite its gaps, limitations, and biases, can also serve as a rich “laboratory” to test hypotheses developed in the natural sciences, social sciences,<sup>3</sup> and humanities, broadly conceived.<sup>7</sup> Historical evidence and “data” can help us empirically test hypotheses and frameworks across a wide range of contextual conditions—and we historians are well placed to use this data as our command of the source material and contextual conditions of source production is far superior to your average economist, sociologist, or climate scientist. Thus, to take just one example, the “female mortality advantage”—the phenomenon of women out-surviving men during famines (and to a certain extent, epidemics) said to be closely connected to biological and physiological principles—can be empirically verified and tested with historical information on sex-disaggregated mortality going back into the past. And indeed, while modern 19th- and 20th-century demographic data tends to support some of the basic tenets of the

concept,<sup>8</sup> other research going back further in time brings up some of the inconsistencies in its application for pre-industrial contexts.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, the idea that epidemic diseases have served as a “great leveler” for societies—creating egalitarian effects—is a principle that can be tested only by going back further in time; in the process uncovering all kinds of markers and indicators that can serve as proxies for redistribution, the mechanisms involved in dictating the direction of redistribution, and the meaning or value of such markers and indicators for the specific societies and communities involved.<sup>10</sup> The temporal nature of the redistributive process makes it impossible to answer without recourse to history—an issue I address next.

Second, I often assert to students that, in certain regards, the historical record can even be more “useful” or more “valuable” than contemporary information. Indeed, we should stop being afraid of having to justify our “relevance”. To begin with, past societies, particularly when we go back further in time to the premodern periods, benefit from strong regional disparities (especially in the countryside) as a source of endogenous variation. Accordingly, we can test hypotheses in a variety of conditions across societies with very different cultural values—levels of trust or emphasis on concepts of honor or shame, for example—or societies with very different levels of material inequality, or systems of property rights, or market integration. But more

importantly, we should learn to assert the intrinsic value of the historical record in itself—after all, it is the only material we have to be able to reconstruct outcomes and developments played out over the long term. Thus, we see, for example, a plethora of recent literature talking about the gendered impacts of COVID-19, and the potential impact of this pandemic on the lives of women across the world.<sup>11</sup> Interesting and valuable, of course, but the impact of COVID-19 on a structural level—the long-term outcomes for women in domains such as human capital formation or chronic health issues or access to economic resources or micro-demographic decision-making and behavior—actually will not be known for some time. These markers simply do not exist yet. In fact, it is only by using historical analysis of epidemics further back in the past can we start to analyze these gendered dimensions played out structurally, and to see whether they persist over time or are just temporary deviations from the norm.

This final point about using history to understand long-term processes—our one clear added-value over other disciplines such as economics or anthropology—is important when I apply this to the context of current and future research and teaching of history at EUR. “Problem-oriented” or “applied” history is not short-hand for “modern history”—just being more temporally modern is not in itself being more “relevant”. In fact, it seems that the biggest advantage we have (when compared to other disciplines) comes from our ability to master historical information linking the deeper past and the more recent past—in the process also escaping the confines of traditionally entrenched (and



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usually Eurocentric) historical periodization. Indeed, it is only by linking historical periods that we learn that economic concepts such as the “male breadwinner” have only really very recent origins and resonance (only from the 19th century),<sup>12</sup> certain parts of Africa have only very recently become centers of gravity for famine (only from later in the 20th century),<sup>13</sup> improvements to public health institutions and infrastructure has not been one long linear story of “progress”,<sup>14</sup> and that notions of tolerance and compassion during epidemics have not gone hand-in-hand neatly with increased understanding of the “science” behind disease causes, transmission, and spread.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alex van Stipriaan, Gijsbert Oonk, and Sandra Manickam, “Preface,” in *History @ Erasmus: Histories of Encounters*, eds. Alex van Stipriaan, Gijsbert Oonk, and Sandra Manickam (Rotterdam: Veenman+, 2018), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Bram Hilken, Bram van Besouw, and Daniel R. Curtis, “A Modern Rendition of a Pre-modern Scenario: Imperfect Institutions and Obscured Vulnerabilities,” *Journal for the History of Environment and Society* 5, no. 1 (2020): 211–221; Daniel R. Curtis and Bram van Besouw, “Not Learning from History. Learning from COVID-19,” Wiley: COVID-19 Resources for the Research Community, April 14, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> A clear overview of its emergence, and resistance to its emergence, in Violet Soen and Bram De Ridder, “Applied History in the Netherlands and Flanders: Synergising Practices in Education, Research, and Society,” *BMGN: Low Countries Historical Review* 136, no. 4 (2021): 27–57.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff, and Catrien Santing, “Dancing with Death. A Historical Perspective on Coping with Covid-19,” *Risk, Hazards, & Crisis in Public Policy* 12, no. 3 (2021): 346–367. The same authors make an enthusiastic case for a Dutch applied history manifesto, but with limited attention to the exact methods currently developed or we need to develop to specifically link past and present: idem, “Historici moeten ook meedenken, juist nu,” *NRC Handelsblad*, 1 May, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See, the classic, Sheilagh Ogilvie, “Whatever is, is right? Economic institutions in pre-industrial Europe,” *Economic History Review* 60, no. 4 (2007): 649–684.

<sup>7</sup> Bas van Bavel and Daniel R. Curtis, “Better Understanding Disasters by Better Using History: Systematically Using the Historical Record as One Way to Advance Research into Disasters,” *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 34, no. 1 (2016): 143–169.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Zarulli, Julia A. Barthold Jones, Anna Oksuzyan, Rune Lindahl-Jacobsen, Kaare Christensen and James W. Vaupel, “Women Live Longer than Men even during Severe Famines and Epidemics,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 4 (2018): 832–840.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel R. Curtis and Qijun Han, “The Female Mortality Advantage in the Seventeenth-Century Rural Low Countries,” *Gender and History* 33, no. 1 (2021): 50–74; Daniel R. Curtis, “From One Mortality Regime to Another? Mortality Crises in Late Medieval Haarlem, Holland, in Perspective,” *Speculum* 96, no. 1 (2021): 127–155; Daniel R. Curtis and Joris Roosen, “The Sex-Selective Impact of the Black Death and Recurring Plagues in the Southern Netherlands, 1349–1450,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 164, no. 2 (2017): 246–259; Jonathan Healey, “Famine and the female mortality advantage: sex, gender and mortality in northwest England, c. 1590–1630,” *Continuity and Change* 30, no. 2 (2015): 153–192; Sharon N. DeWitte and Maryanne Kowaleski, “Black Death Bodies,” *Fragments: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Ancient and Medieval Pasts* 6 (2017): 1–37.

<sup>10</sup> For the original thesis: Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Clare Wenham, Julia Smith, and Rosemary Morgan, “COVID-19: The gendered impacts of the outbreak,” *The Lancet* 395, no. 10227 (2020): 846–848; Clare Wenham, Julia Smith, Sara E. Davies, Huiyun Feng, Karen A. Grépin, Sophie Harman, Asha Herten-Crabb, and Rosemary Morgan, “Women are most affected by pandemics — Lessons from past outbreaks,” *Nature* 583, no. 7815 (2020) 194–198.

<sup>12</sup> Emma Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Alex de Waal, *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Guy Geltner, *Roads to Health: Infrastructure and Urban Wellbeing in Later Medieval Italy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Samuel K. Cohn, *Epidemics: Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).