

« Changez vos feuilles, gardez vos racines. » A personal vision on history education at the Erasmus University

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History of Society as guidance

I took the quotation in the title from the work of the famous French writer Victor Hugo (1802-1885). He wrote in his posthumously published *Post-Scriptum de ma vie*: “Change your leaves, keep intact your roots”.¹ I think that this phrase should be a guideline for making educational and research policies within the history department of the Erasmus University. The history department at the Erasmus University was founded in 1978 as a new part of the faculty of social sciences. This genealogy implies that history is not seen as a field of the humanities at Erasmus University, but as a social science. The vision on history at Erasmus University differed from other universities in several ways. The unique profile of the department was described as ‘history of society’ and it was characterized by (1) the comparison of different types of societies from all over the world to avoid eurocentrism, (2) a diachronic study of relevant themes in society from a long-term perspective to explain the present, (3) the use of social science theories and methodologies, and (4) an active preparation for the labour market during the study.² This specific perspective on historical science made the Rotterdam programme distinct from those at other universities in the Netherlands. I think that it is wise to stay faithful to this original mission in our attempts to define the profile of our department. The leaves may change because staff comes and goes over time, but the roots are strong and make sure that we are distinct from other history departments. This will legitimize and strengthen our position in the Dutch academic landscape because it makes that we add something different to the academic field of history.

The department has witnessed several major changes in its 45 years of existence. The general trend during the past decades was to move further away from the original concept of ‘history of society’. This had to do with the fact that new staff was often trained at other universities and had little affinity with the concept ‘history of society’. In this way, the department became more mainstream and relied more and more on traditional examples of historical scholarship. I think that this is a pity because the unique Rotterdam approach made studying and doing research in Rotterdam a deliberate choice and it legitimized the existence of the department in the proximity of other history departments. I

¹ Victor Hugo, *Post-scriptum de ma vie* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1901), <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/63768/pg63768-images.html.utf8>.

² Alex van Stipriaan, Gijsbert Oonk, and Sandra Khor Manickam, ‘Preface’, in *Histories of Encounters*, ed. Alex van Stipriaan, Gijsbert Oonk, and Sandra Khor Manickam (Rotterdam: Erasmus University, Erasmus School of History Culture and Communication, 2018), 5–6, hdl.handle.net/1765/115410; Willem T. M. Frijhoff, ‘Tien Jaar Maatschappijgeschiedenis: Kritische Overwegingen Bij Een Lustrum’, in *Geschiedenis En Maatschappij. Tien Jaar Historisch Onderzoek in Rotterdam* (Rotterdam: Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 1988), 1–2.

believe that it also ensures that history in Rotterdam is a more exciting field because it questions traditional perspectives and opens up new directions for research.

History of Society in the bachelor curriculum

The name History of Society remained the official name of the master programme until 2018. That year the master coordinator asked to remove this name from the national CROHO register.³ However, the Rotterdam approach to history is still reflected in our bachelor and master programmes. It is no coincidence that Rotterdam was the first history department in the Netherlands that offered an international bachelor programme, starting in the academic year 2015-2016. This fits in the history of society approach which favours an international oriented approach above a Dutch view on history. It was a deliberative choice to teach students in the first term of the programme the course 'Global History' because this makes clear that the world and not Europe should be the frame of reference for students. It was the aim to apply the same global approach in all courses, but this remains a challenge in the current programme. Several courses still refer to the Europe-centred modernisation process to teach historical developments. This is visible in the name of courses such as 'History of Early Modern Societies' and 'History of Modern Societies'. The original history programme tried to avoid such a European grand-narrative by discerning different types of societies which could be found all over the world: Pre-Agricultural, Agricultural, Agricultural-Urban and Industrial Societies.⁴ One could argue that these typologies also reflect a Europe-centred idea of gradual growth towards modern industrialisation and beyond, but it offered students a fresh substitute to traditional ways of teaching history.

Our bachelor programme offers students the chance to make a choice between four focus areas in their second year: social history, international relations, cultural history and economic history. This is in line with the already mentioned long-term thematic approach typical for history of society with courses focusing on important societal topics instead of Eurocentric historical periods. In this way, the current set-up of the second and third year are more typical for the history of society approach than the curriculum of the first year. European periodizations are not used in the name of the course and staff members are asked to use a long-term thematic approach to teach about challenges in society, such as migration, interaction between religions, capitalism and inequality etc.

The third characteristic of the history of society approach in Rotterdam is the use of social science theories and methodologies. The course History and Social Sciences in the first year of the bachelor programme introduces the students into major theories and concepts from the social sciences. In the second year of the bachelor programme students have to take Quantitative Historical Methods as a mandatory course because of the social science background of our history programme. This is quite unique in the Netherlands because all history studies removed this course from their core curriculum in the past decades. However, quantitative methods experience a revival at the moment. Utrecht University has already re-introduced quantitative methods in the first year of their bachelor

³ Minutes of the departmental meeting of 30 January 2018.

⁴ van Stipriaan, Oonk, and Manickam, 'Preface', 5.

programme.⁵ This has to do with the growing popularity of big data and digital humanities. Other universities do not have a statistical course in their core curriculum, but it is expected that this will change in the future.⁶ The use of big data repositories and new techniques to quantitatively investigate narrative sources urges historians to rely more on statistical methods.⁷ This means that the old divide between quantitative-qualitative and social science-humanities research has become less relevant and that universities need to invest in new courses to offer students these new approaches into qualitative research.⁸

This brings us to the last point about our bachelor programme: the preparation for the labour market. This was a central point of interest of the original history of society programme and the presence of a mandatory internship is a legacy of this objective. History studies traditionally score quite low on this goal. The latest scores of the National Student Survey point out that history students give their programmes on average a score of 26 per cent for preparation for the labour market. This is better than Arts and Culture studies which are the worst student in the class with a score of 18 percent, but it is far away from programmes such as econometrics and law that receive rates of respectively 83 and 61 per cent.⁹ If we compare the academic history bachelors in the Netherlands according to the data of the National Student Survey, we can conclude that most history programmes – Rotterdam included – receive a score of 2.9 on a five points scale. Two universities received a lower score of 2.7 and only has performed better with a rate of 3.0.¹⁰ So, history at the EUR is not underperforming here, but we are no longer a frontrunner.

Master Specializations in History at Erasmus University

⁵ 'Studieprogramma Geschiedenis', accessed 26 March 2023, <https://www.uu.nl/bachelors/geschiedenis/studieprogramma>.

⁶ 'Studieprogramma - Universiteit Leiden', accessed 26 March 2023, <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/onderwijs/opleidingen/bachelor/geschiedenis/over-de-opleiding/studieprogramma>; 'Studieprogramma Geschiedenis', accessed 26 March 2023, <https://www.ru.nl/opleidingen/bachelors/geschiedenis/studieprogramma-geschiedenis>; 'Bachelor Voltijd Geschiedenis', Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 29 October 2012, <https://www.rug.nl/bachelors/history/>; Universiteit van Amsterdam, 'Studieprogramma - Bachelor Geschiedenis', Universiteit van Amsterdam, 12 January 2023, <https://www.uva.nl/programmas/bachelors/geschiedenis/studieprogramma/studieprogramma.html>; 'Bachelor Geschiedenis', Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, accessed 26 March 2023, <https://vu.nl/nl/onderwijs/bachelor/geschiedenis/inhoud>.

⁷ Joris van Eijnatten, Toine Pieters, and Jaap Verheul, 'Big Data for Global History: The Transformative Promise of Digital Humanities', *Low Countries Historical Review* 128, no. 4 (2013): 58–59, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.9350>; Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 95–111.

⁸ Roberto Franzosi, 'A Third Road to the Past? Historical Scholarship in the Age of Big Data', *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 50, no. 4 (2017): 227–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01615440.2017.1361879>.

⁹ *Keuzegids Universiteiten 2023* (Leiden: Keuzegids, 2022), 68–72, 87, 121.

¹⁰ 'Vergelijken: Studiekeuze123', studiekeuze123.nl, accessed 26 March 2023, <https://www.studiekeuze123.nl/vergelijk>.

The history department offers students the possibility to continue their education in the master. Currently, we have three specialisations: Global History and International Relations, GLOCAL and Applied History. It is more difficult to tick the box for each of the Rotterdam characteristics in these one-year programmes, but each of them contains elements of the Rotterdam DNA. Global History and International Relations is the largest specialisation in our master, and it is characterized by the combination of concepts from political sciences – the international relations approach – and perspectives that transcend male white views on global history. Students in this specialisation get an introduction into the long-term history of power relations in the world during the first two terms. The Rotterdam approach is also characterised by the critical approach to Eurocentric ideas of world order because this refers to the long-standing importance of non-western history in the department. A question for the future is how we can distinguish ourselves from other programmes in international relations in the Netherlands and especially in Holland.

The interdisciplinary approach is one of the key features of the Erasmus Mundus master programme GLOCAL. This two-year master's degree has its roots in a network of business historians who wanted to create a programme at the intersection of economics and business history. In this way, they set up a master on the intersection of humanities and social sciences. This becomes clear when we look at the curriculum of the programme: all students have to start their first year at the university of Glasgow where they study at the School of Social and Political Sciences. The GLOCAL students are also able to study at the Faculty of Economics and Business of the University of Barcelona or the Department of Economic History of the University of Uppsala before joining the history department in Rotterdam. With its origins in business history the GLOCAL programme perfectly fits in the profile of the Erasmus University and its strong tradition of economics and business.¹¹ However, it distinguishes itself from economic and business degrees with its emphasis on the combination of social sciences and humanities perspectives. The content of the programme also wants to avoid a Eurocentric approach by offering various perspectives on economic developments. Its distinctive profile makes that GLOCAL is a unique programme in the Dutch educational field.

The latest addition to the history master is the specialization Applied History. This programme also stimulates interdisciplinary exchanges by providing electives from the Media Department and Arts and Culture Studies. This emphasis on social sciences and interdisciplinary perspectives are an essential part of the Rotterdam DNA.¹² Furthermore, Applied History emphasizes another aspect of the Rotterdam history of society: the practical orientation of the historical approach and the attention for service to society. This was from the beginning a typical characteristic of history of society.¹³ The programme did not only train students in writing academic papers, but also stimulated other forms of knowledge transfer. Film, television and radio making were seen as alternative ways of disseminating scientific results.¹⁴ These fit in the current wish of the university to make social impact and to facilitate

¹¹ Paul Thomas van de Laar, 'De Identiteit van Een Rotterdamse Universiteit', in *Ambitie En Identiteit. Van Nederlandsche Handels-Hoogeschool Tot Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 1913-2013*, ed. M. Dicke, Paul Thomas van de Laar, and Joop C. Visser (Rotterdam: Stad en bedrijf, 2013), 91.

¹² Frijhoff, 'Tien Jaar Maatschappijgeschiedenis: Kritische Overwegingen Bij Een Lustrum', 11.

¹³ Ben Maandag, 'Uitbreiding En Profilering', in *Ambitie En Identiteit. Van Nederlandsche Handels-Hoogeschool Tot Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 1913-2013*, ed. M. Dicke, Paul Thomas van de Laar, and Joop C. Visser (Rotterdam: Stad en bedrijf, 2013), 62; van de Laar, 'De Identiteit van Een Rotterdamse Universiteit', 93.

¹⁴ Frijhoff, 'Tien Jaar Maatschappijgeschiedenis: Kritische Overwegingen Bij Een Lustrum', 14; van Stipriaan, Oonk, and Manickam, 'Preface', 6.

'capstone projects' which are alternatives for the traditional thesis that prepares students for a career in science. The applied nature of this specialization is in line with the tradition of history of society, but the new programme still needs to establish itself in the Dutch academic landscape. The choice to offer Applied History was a way to connect with the department's own history. However, it is also an orientation towards the future now we see that the field of Applied History is becoming more prominent.¹⁵

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¹⁵ See for instance the foundation of a new journal in this field. 'Journal of Applied History', accessed 28 March 2023, <https://brill-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/view/journals/joah/joah-overview.xml>.

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