

Reference Cultures and Imagined Empires from a Western Perspective, 1850-2000

Veranstalter: Jaap Verheul / Pim Huijnen, Research Institute for History and Art History, Utrecht University; Research project „Translantis“; Research project „Asymenc“

Datum, Ort: 11.06.2014–13.06.2014, Utrecht

Bericht von: Pim Huijnen, Research Institute for History and Art History, Utrecht University

One of the main aims of the conference ‘Reference Cultures and Imagined Empires from a Western Perspective, 1850-2000’, held on June 11-13 at Utrecht University (the Netherlands), was to conceptually and methodologically frame two recently started Utrecht-based historical research projects. The first is ‘Digital Humanities Approaches to Reference Cultures: The Emergence of the United States in Public Discourse in the Netherlands, 1890-1990’ (short: ‘Translantis’)¹, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). The second is the HERA funded project ‘Asymmetrical Encounters: E-Humanity Approaches to Reference Cultures in Europe, 1815-1992’ (short: ‘Asymenc’)², a collaboration between Utrecht University, University College London (Ulrich Tiedau) and Trier University (Claudine Moulin and Caroline Sporleder). Joris van Eijnatten, Toine Pieters and Jaap Verheul from Utrecht University are, respectively, the principal investigator and daily supervisors for both research teams.

Three postdoc researchers in History and a PhD student in computational linguistics form the research team of Asymenc. The Translantis’ research team consists of three PhD students and three postdoc researchers in History (of science) and one PhD student in Informatics from Utrecht University and the University of Amsterdam. Their common goal is to give shape to the concept of reference cultures in the American-Dutch context (Translantis) and within Europe (Asymenc). At this conference, organized by Jaap Verheul and Pim Huijnen, a group of leading scholars gathered to discuss the concept of reference cultures from, amongst others, the perspectives of modernization, postcolonial-

ism, Americanization, transnational history and new cultural history. The third day of the conference was dedicated to the promises of digital humanities techniques for the study of reference cultures.

JAAP VERHEUL (Utrecht) explained in his kick-off on the first day of the conference that the concept of reference cultures has been adopted within the context of both projects to focus on the role of public discourses in processes of cultural transfer over the long run. The concept has its roots in Espange and Werner’s methodological reflections from their publication from 1987 ‘La construction d’une référence culturelle allemande en France: genèse et histoire (1750-1914)’.³ While relating to the historiography of the Americanization of European economy and culture during the 20th century, the concept turns the focus explicitly toward the ‘receiving end’. More than that, the idea of ‘reference cultures’ is intrinsically connected to public discourse. Reference cultures are discursive constructs; they exist exclusively as arguments, examples or straw men in discussions. Verheul described: „[Reference cultures] offer or impose a model that others imitate, adapt or resist, creating dimensions in public discourses. It is a transnational, extra-territorial exchange of thoughts and ideas. In short: a mental map.“

What this means is that the use in Dutch language of the word ‘efficiency’, for example, may refer to more than just describing something being efficient. Dependent on time and context, it may also refer as a *pars pro toto* to the system of scientific management that was introduced in the Netherlands in the first half of the 20th century. From the context in which the word is used we can then learn something about Dutch mentality and culture in a given time. „Efficiency is being economical“, one Dutch newspaper, for example, calls it in 1919, „but not the Dutch kind of being economical. It is being economical in the way that forbids

¹ Translantis project homepage: <<http://www.translantis.nl>> (27.8.2014).

² Asymenc project homepage: <<http://asymenc.wp.hum.uu.nl>> (27.8.2014).

³ Michel Espange / Michael Werner, ‘La construction d’une référence culturelle allemande en France: genèse et histoire (1750-1914)’, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 42 (1987), pp. 969-992.

the use of any gram of power or any cent that is unprofitable or wrong. And it is spending heaps of money where it can be effective. This efficiency is the American way of being economical."⁴

During the first day of the conference, a number of keynote speakers expanded on various examples or aspects of reference cultures. GERARD DELANTY (Brighton) from the University of Sussex spoke about 'modernity' as a reference culture and 'Europe' as its vessel during the 19th century. Delanty considers modernity as a cognitive order, an awareness that „nothing is settled once and for all“. Individuals are able to formulate new answers to key challenges based on knowledge. This awareness first manifested itself within ideas of freedom, individualism and democracy in Europe. At the same time it was the vagueness of these concepts (and of 'modernity' itself) that formed their attractiveness – and thereby enabling both 'modernity' and 'Europe' to become reference cultures for other parts of the world.

DAVID ELLWOOD (Bologna) from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies focused in his talk on the role of soft power in the formation of the United States as a reference culture in Europe. Ellwood made an argument of adding a fourth to Joseph Nye's three defining resources for soft power⁵ – being cultures, political values and foreign policy – in (again) „the special ability to generate and apply models of change and reinvention, of modernity and progress“. In the case of America, in its unpredictability lies a central aspect of its status as a super power: it forms a challenge ('Le Défi Américain'⁶) that other countries are forced to cope with. Ellwood considered the transnational perspective as a 'big equalizer', as if all political, economic or cultural exchange is reciprocal and does not involve hierarchy and power. However, Ellwood argued, nothing in international history is equal: migration, for example, usually goes from poor areas to wealthy ones, products travel from the country of origin to the rest of the world – not vice versa.

While stressing the power relations that the concept of reference cultures unavoidably implies, Ellwood criticized the 'transnational turn' in history writing. The role of transna-

tional processes was the subject of AXEL KÖRNER's (London) talk, who is the director of the Centre of Transnational History at University College London. Körner convincingly argued that Ellwood brawled against an outdated idea of transnational history: no transnational historian, Körner insisted, will argue that all things are equal. Their mission is to expose the nation-state as a construct that unnecessarily hinders the study of a lot of historical processes.

It was agreed upon that the Translantis project should account for this transnational warning. After all, the project studies the impact of *American* culture and ways of thinking in *the Netherlands*. How, then, to avoid of falling into the trap of overemphasizing the roles of both nation-states? Well, project leader JORIS VAN EIJNATTEN (Utrecht) answered, if transnational history is about exchange and relations, reference cultures is about the results of those exchange and relations. Besides, he stressed, it is because of its digital methodology that the project is able to make the necessary differentiations.

Digital history in general and the digital methodologies that both organizing projects have adopted were the focus point of the third day of the conference. The day before, the second day, was filled with workshop sessions on Empire, postcolonialism, political models and modernization. PIM HUIJNEN (Utrecht) started the third day with some general considerations about the use of digital techniques in historical research. In particular, he pointed to the fact that digital tools are not here to replace historical analyses. Mostly, they can be used as heuristic instruments – as an addition to the historian's toolbox. Next, PhD student JESPER VERHOEF (Utrecht) from the Translantis project showed how he uses the project's custom-built text mining tool to do just that.

BOB NICHOLSON (Ormskirk) gave a highly entertaining talk about how the growing mass of digitized newspaper archives con-

⁴ 'Een grondige wijziging van ons strafsysteem, hoe noodig zij is en hoe zij kan worden bereikt', Het Centrum 11-10-1919, p. 4.

⁵ Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to lead. The changing nature of American power*, New York 1990.

⁶ Jean Jacques Servan-Schreiber, *Le Défi Américain*, Paris 1967.

tributes to the study of reference cultures. Based on his PhD research, he presented how newspapers helped introducing American slang in English language in the 19th century.⁷ Digitized archives significantly helped him to reconstruct the trajectories that particular expressions or jokes covered by studying the metadata (dates, locations). In general, he argued, digitized newspaper archives have brought about a fundamental shift in the heuristic process of historical research. Traditionally, analyzing newspapers started with making representative selections. Digitization has enabled to exchange this top-down approach for a bottom-up one: the bulk of a digitized newspapers corpus can now be used as a single bag of words, in which one can search for any topic of interest. Not until after one has found something worthwhile, the date and title of the newspaper at hand come into play. These can be further analyzed in a next step.

MATTHIAS LEMKE (Hamburg) showed how to bring this kind of digital research into practice by example of his own research project. The Postdemokratie und Neoliberalismus project he is part of at the Helmut-Schmidt-Universität Hamburg uses a dataset of selected German newspapers to digitally analyze the increase of neoliberal arguments for political action in the postwar era. As neoliberalism can also be seen as a reference culture, this research project was a perfect example of how the digital study of reference cultures may look like. Lemke explained how heatmaps, networks of co-occurrences and other text analyses tools gave him and his colleagues an idea of the use and spread of neoliberal arguments in the German public debate.

All in all, the three-day conference offered an abundance of theoretical and practical insights on reference cultures, Empire and transnational studies. In spite of the hopes of the organizing team, these did not result in a consistent framework of the possibilities and limits of the concept of reference cultures. However, ROB KROES (Utrecht) in his closing remarks did bring the theory of the first day elegantly in conjunction with the digital practice of the third day by pointing at the importance of language. The shifting mean-

ing of words can be used to bring the culture of social change to light. What cultural historians like Warren Susman ('Culture as History'⁸) did by hand, can now be done by machine. The digital techniques that historians use, after all, usually are tools for linguistic analysis. The digital turn thus shifts attention toward the linguistic aspects of culture. The focus on reference cultures seems to fit this type of research perfectly. After all, America as a reference culture, for example, is hidden in the meanings of the words that Europeans use to describe it – in the connotations of metaphors like 'the new world'. The challenge for the researchers within both projects is to uncover these connotations.

Conference Overview:

Joris van Eijnatten (Utrecht University), Opening

Keynotes

Gerard Delanty (University of Sussex), Europe and the Emergence of Modernity

Jaap Verheul (Utrecht University), Reference Cultures and Imagined Empires: Concepts and Challenges

David Ellwood (Johns Hopkins University, Bologna), The United States as a Reference Culture

Frank Mehring (Radboud University), Let's do the „Sten-Gun Walk!": Smart Power and the Euro-American Soundtrack of Liberation

Axel Koerner (University College London), International history and transnational history: questioning the validity of national explanation

Session 1: Referencing in Urban Cultures

Chair: Axel Koerner

Rolf Hugoson (Umeå University), Branding Bohemia: Place, Power and Property in Urban Culture

Melvin Wevers (Utrecht University), Between Flappers and Bakvissen, the American female

⁷ See one example in Bob Nicholson's talk: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWmfFHZegmU>> (27.8.2014).

⁸ Warren Susman, Culture as history. The transformation of American society in the twentieth century, New York 1984.

smoker in Dutch Public Discourse

Tessa Hauswedell (University College London), The European 'Metropolis' as a reference culture

Session 2: Reference cultures in the context of Modernization and Colonization

Chair Joris van Eijnatten

Angela Diaz (Daemen College in Amherst, New York), 'Filibuster Forays': The Cuban Filibuster Expeditions and Racial Rhetoric in New Orleans, 1850-1851

Denise Jenison (Kent State University), Making the Desert Bloom: Modernization as a Reference Culture in the Debate over Palestine

Matthijs Kuipers (European University Institute, Florence), The Metropolitan Mission: The missionary public as part of Dutch imperial culture, 1860-1900

Session 3: Finding reference cultures in materiality

Chair: Reinhold Wagnleitner

Hermione Giffard (Utrecht University), Reference Cultures and Memory: Britain, Post-Nazi Germany and the Public History of the Jet Engine

Maya Wester (Utrecht University), References to America and local habits: tobacco consumption in Dutch public discourse 1945-1985

Lisanne Walma (Utrecht University), Reference Cultures and the Identity Formation of Morphine Users in The Netherlands

Session 4: Reference cultures as Literary themes

Chair: David Ellwood

Michail Zontos (Utrecht University), Europe as reference culture in Frederick Jackson Turner's history

Eric Rauth (independent scholar, Washington, D.C.), Uniting States versus Empires: The Dutch Golden Age in Historical Writings of Theodore Roosevelt and J. E. Barker

Karen Dovell (Daemen College in Amherst, New York), „The Goddess of Liberty was impure“: Classical Tradition as a Reference Culture in Margaret Fuller's Woman in the Nine-

teenth Century

Session 5: Images of the East and West

Chair: Remco Raben

Funda Berksoy (Mimar Sinan University of Fine Arts in Istanbul), Cultural Manifestations of German Imperialism in the Ottoman Empire: Paintings
Consolidating the Imperial Project

Chi Chi Huang (University of Hong Kong), Empire in Postcards: The British Empirical imagination of Hong Kong, 1841 – 1939

Beate Loßfller (University of Duisburg-Essen), The perpetual Other: The Japanese architecture in western imagination

Vincent Kuitenbrouwer (University of Amsterdam), Covering colonialism: references to the Indies in the Dutch press, 1920s

Session 6: Models for Political Renewal

Chair: Sheryl Kroen

Marzia Maccaferri (University of London), A new anglophilia: italian intellectuals and the re-discovery of the english political model 1940-1950

Lennaert van Heumen (Radboud University, Nijmegen), The American model and early European integration

Yulia Komleva (Ural State University, USU, Ekaterinburg), The Reference Culture of the Late Russian Empire

Keynote lecture

Sheryl Kroen (University of Florida), Rehabilitating „Europe“ after WWII: The Transatlantic Conversation

Reinhold and Günter Wagnleitner (University of Salzburg), Informance: Jazz - the Classical Music of Globalization

Translantis Digital workshop Mapping Empire

Chair: Toine Pieters

Pim Huijnen (Utrecht University), Finding Reference Cultures after the Digital Turn

Jesper Verhoef (Utrecht University), How to strike gold? The exploratory value of cultural text mining

Mariona Coll Ardanoy (University of Trier)

/ Maarten van den Bos (Utrecht University),
Laboratories of Community. Mapping discourses on reconciliation, faith, and justice in early postwar Europe

Keynotes

Bob Nicholson (Edge Hill University), Victorian Culture in Transatlantic Perspective: Digital Approaches

Matthias Lemke (Helmut Schmidt Universität, Hamburg), Postdemocracy and Neoliberalism: Digital strategies for the identification of economic references in large text data collections

David Ellwood (Johns Hopkins University, Bologna) / Rob Kroes (Utrecht University), Response to the Workshop Sessions

Toine Pieters / Jaap Verheul (Utrecht University), Final Remarks

Tagungsbericht *Reference Cultures and Imagined Empires from a Western Perspective, 1850-2000*. 11.06.2014–13.06.2014, Utrecht, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 24.09.2014.