

Terms, Voices and Perspectives

Some basic principles of the research programme Independence, Decolonisation, Violence and War in Indonesia 1945-1950

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Introduction

This short memorandum, adopted after discussion with the Research Program Council and the international Scientific Advisory Committee of the program, sets out a number of concepts that shape the discussion about terminology: multiple perspectives, historical interpretations and multiple voices. These concepts are inextricably linked, something that is also reflected in the design of the research programme and the way in which its results will be reported.

The fact that the issue of perspectives, terms and voices is considered at length is also related to the topical political and social debate about colonialism and the war in Indonesia between 1945 and 1950. It is an intense debate, one that not only shows that this history is still very much alive, but also that opinions on this issue are often diametrically and resolutely opposed, including among generations with no personal memories of the events. By allowing different perspectives to resonate, the historiography can provide arguments and visions to open up the conversation about this contested past.

1. Multiple perspectives

It could be said that the use of different perspectives is as old as the discipline of history itself. This was what distinguished the founding father of Western historiography, Herodotus, from his contemporaries: 'he sought to provide a whole multiplicity of perspectives'.¹

The process starts when the historian reflects, from the present to the past, on events with known 'outcomes', often with much more knowledge than the historical persons (actors) themselves ever possessed. At the same time, this perspective on the past is deeply influenced, by definition, by the historian's own age and society; and, for that reason, it is good to be aware of this and to reflect on it as well as possible.

This is just one part of the story, however. If, as a historian, you wish to understand events in the past, you also have to try to extricate yourself from your own age and society, and immerse yourself – with all limitations this has – in the motives and perspectives of the actors in their historical context, which was of course also shaped

¹ Paul Cartledge, 'Herodotus: A Historian for All Time', *History Today* 10 October 2013.

by the political, socio-economic, cultural and ecological forces of the age. And while that is no small task, it is crucial: by attempting to understand what motivated people, what they saw and thought, and the space they had to do this, we can gain greater insight into people's actions and thereby into the course of the historical events themselves. In short, it is a professional requirement to take different perspectives seriously and to include them in the analysis.

To put this in epistemological terms: *immersing yourself in the perspectives of different historical actors contributes to a better understanding of the course of historical events.* In other words, multiperspectivity is an indispensable, essential instrument in the historian's toolkit.

At the same time, choosing to include multiple perspectives is a matter of principle, an expression of the attempt to be inclusive, to avoid bias wherever possible, and to highlight the perspectives of different historical actors. Although, for various reasons, such an exercise may not go down well with everyone or every social group, it can also be experienced as unusually enriching.

Fully-fledged multiperspectivity is an ideal, an ambition that will never be realised fully. That is because it is beset by many obstacles: not only language barriers and geographical and cultural distance, but also the limitations of the archival sources, which often mirror the power dynamics of the time, and in which the voiceless cannot be heard. In such cases, multiperspectivity is achieved by reading the sources differently, or by searching for sources other than official archives or established media, such as material remains or oral sources.

Although the Dutch policy and the use of violence, in particular, in their social, political and international context, are a key focus of this research programme, as formulated in the programme's design, we are aiming for multiperspectivity. This ambition is interpreted in various ways, including by

- presenting different actors in historical context and by highlighting their perspectives;
- cooperating with Indonesian historians, wherever possible;
- consulting as wide a range of sources as possible, from diverse historical actors (different parties, international observers, groups in Indonesia and the Netherlands, etc.) (see also 3);
- an 'eccentric reading' of official sources, by seeking the experiences and perspectives of those other than official institutions;
- highlighting differences in terminology and allowing them to resonate as an expression of the perspectives (see also 4).

2. Historical interpretations

Our stories about the past are always and invariably *interpretations*. It would be an illusion to seek an 'objectively realistic picture' of history, a kind of completely

transparent glass window through which to view historical reality, because there is no such thing as unmediated and comprehensive access to the past.² Instead, historians create a picture of the past from a chaotic amount of surviving material (in official documents, newspapers, letters, material remains, interviews); or better, an *interpretation* of the historical events, or, to put it yet another way, a *proposal*, an *invitation* to view the past in a particular way. In doing so, the art is to draw on established skills and standards to produce an account as plausible as possible.

Discussions between historians – ‘a discussion without end’, in the legendary words of the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl³ – are almost invariably about *interpretations* and *perspectives*, and about the place and relevance of facts within them, more than about the facts themselves. In other words: facts do not play an independent role in interpretations, but acquire meaning *within* them, through their coherence, rather than forming their *basis*.⁴ It is precisely this that distinguishes historical interpretations – and those of most other interpretations in the humanities – from most research in the natural sciences, for example. Although historians strive for ‘faithful interpretations’, these are inevitably shaped by the views of the historians themselves, and the age and society in which they live. In the early twentieth century, this realisation inspired the much-quoted dictum by the liberal Italian historian and philosopher, Benedetto Croce: ‘all history is contemporary history [Ogni vera storia è storia contemporanea]’.⁵

In other words, both the questions and the answers in historiography are shaped by the present. Although objectivity, in the sense of reaching the absolute truth about the past, is an illusion, this is not the case if we conceive of objectivity as a *method*. The view that the outcomes of historical research cannot be absolutely ‘true’ does not give the historian *carte blanche* to resort to arbitrariness and fantasy. On the contrary, the awareness that this is all about convincing (or unconvincing) interpretations forces us to be as cautious as possible in our methods, and must function as an incentive to reflect on the methodology used, the handling of the sources, and their eventual interpretation: in short, to reflect on our own work and to put it up for discussion.

It is to be expected that both the separate studies and the final report of the research program will present new interpretations of the events of 1945-1950. That is not only

² ‘Das Paradies der reinen Unmittelbarkeit ist verschlossen’, according to Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolische Formen*, quoted in Anton Mooij, *De Academische Boekengids* 41 (Oct. 2003) 15.

³ ‘Historiography can be seen as a discussion without end’, P. Geyl, *Napoleon. Voor en tegen in de Franse geschiedschrijving* (1946) 5.

⁴ Cf. Frank Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A semantic analysis of the historian's language*. Nijhoff, The Hague, etc.: 1981. Cf., e.g., R. H. de Bock. Het onderscheid tussen feit en recht. Tussen waarheid en onzekerheid, *Burgerlijk Proces & Praktijk nr. XI, 1.2* (31-05-2011)

https://www.navigators.nl/document/ida682c7a8ea800e5ff05537e7f3feac64/tussen-waarheid-en-onzekerheid-burgerlijk-proces-praktijk-nr-xi-12-het-onderscheid-tussen-feit-en-recht?ctx=WKNL_CSL_1626

⁵ Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, Bari 1917, 1920², p. 5.

a consequence of the wider multiperspectivist approach and the use of new and different sources, but also because the researchers have been able to benefit from the new insights and studies published by other historians in recent years. For example, much attention has been paid to the political, social and military developments in different regions, giving rise to a much more varied picture than the simple dichotomy of the Netherlands vs. the Republic of Indonesia.

Another example is the reconceptualisation of the Bersiap period: a term that no longer describes a period just after the Japanese capitulation, when, according to the Dutch historiography, mainly Dutch and Dutch East Indians were the victims of Indonesian violence, or, to put it even more starkly, victims of ethnically-motivated conflict; but a period in which Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, British (East Indian) and other communities were also victims of Indonesian violence, as alleged (or otherwise) opponents of the Republic of Indonesia. The aim of this reconceptualisation is not to 'downplay the Dutch suffering', as some fear,⁶ but to gain a more penetrating and comprehensive understanding of the course of the events and the dynamics of the violence that took place from August 1945.

3. Multiple voices/multivocality

If multiperspectivity is mainly about gaining a better understanding of historical events, multivocality is primarily about the way in which we tell or structure the historical narrative; in other words, the representation of the past. Or, to put it in other words, multivocality is about the question of how the different perspectives are given a human voice; and that is important, particularly when it comes to events that were experienced as traumatic, or when the emotions and memories of the historical actors are conflicting or incompatible. After all, the experiences of mass violence that form a central focus of this programme have often given rise to irreconcilable differences between people and groups, and sometimes even form the basis for group identities.

It was Saul Friedlander, the influential historian of the persecution of the Jews, who coined the term 'multivocality' for the historiography. He did so at a now-famous conference in 1990, on *Probing the limits of representation – Nazism and the 'Final solution'*. For Friedlander, 'multivocality' was a new way to write history that made space for emotions, contradictions, paradoxes and a multiplicity of voices, while at the same time allowing one to distance oneself from the traditional image of the historian as the all-knowing narrator of a 'definitive' story. Telling history in this way does not mean that the historical events are relativised; on the contrary, they are in fact anchored even more firmly in the different stories. In addition, multivocality also

⁶ As argued by the Federation of Dutch Indos/Indo Dutch, <http://www.federatie-indo.nl/19-06-14/> (d.d. 25-6-2020).

gives the historian an opportunity to reveal their own presence in the historical story, and thus to engage in the necessary reflection on their role as an interpreter.⁷

In Friedlander's view, this new approach was necessary precisely because of the extreme nature of the events that he was describing: the physical destruction of communities by the National Socialists. In his widely acclaimed two-volume work, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, he put these views into practice, and in doing so established a new standard in historiography.⁸ He presented numerous witness accounts and drew on diaries, reports, memos and articles, and engaged in a step-by-step analysis of the different levels of reality that co-exist alongside one another. As this last point shows, multiplicity and multivocality - multiple perspectives and multiple voices - go hand in hand.

In the research programme, the different voices will be addressed at length, not least in the final report and the special 'Witnesses and Contemporaries' project. The fact that we want multiple voices to be represented in the studies and other products is a logical consequence of the inclusion of multiple perspectives: it is a way to communicate to the reader whilst simultaneously 'doing justice' to the different historical perspectives.

4. Terminology

Terms are fluid and are invariably associated with perspectives: those of disciplines, domains, individuals, parties, institutions, national historiographies and periodisations. The same phenomenon can be described using different terms, whilst the same term can have different meanings. In the view of Indonesian republicans, what the Dutch government in 1947, and again in 1948, described euphemistically as 'police actions' amounted to a war, an act of aggression against the recently-declared republic, which had by then been recognised *de facto* by a number of states, including the Netherlands itself, and even *de jure* by several states.

Describing this situation is problematic from an international legal perspective. Nevertheless, most historians will not refrain from using the word 'war' to describe the entire period between 1945 and 1950, just as they refer to the Eighty Years' War or the Yugoslav Wars. In that case, the term 'war' is not used in a legal or

⁷ In the words of James E. Young: 'For the integrated historian, this means a historiography whose narrative skein is disrupted by the sound of the historian's own, self-conscious voice. As Friedlander writes, such "commentary should disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, withstand the need for closure." These interruptions would also remind readers that this history is being told and remembered by someone in a particular time and place, that it is the product of human hands and minds.' *At Memory's Edge. After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, Yale University Press 2002.

⁸ Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: Volume 1: The Years of Persecution 1933-1939 ; The Years of Extermination 1939-1945*, New York: HarperCollins 1997/2007.

international legal sense,⁹ or to describe a regular armed conflict between two universally-recognised states, but to describe a *state of war* in which every aspect of Indonesian and Dutch society was influenced by the violent conflict; a state of war that determined the lives of soldiers and civilians in far-reaching ways, by limiting them severely, or forcing them to move and driving them away; a state of war that created new political, legal, economic and moral relations.¹⁰

There are thus many other terms that can be associated with diverse perspectives, depending on the time, place or discipline: 'freedom fighter', 'rebel', 'perpetrator' and 'victim', 'sovereignty', 'legitimacy', 'excessive force', 'war crimes', 'internment camps'. It is an illusion to think that such phenomena and events could be described in unambiguous, exclusive terms; in many cases, this would not even be possible within a single framework. For example, it was precisely in the period between 1945 and 1950 that enormous developments took place in international law, which led to new concepts, rules (or norms) and treaties – meaning that not even the legal framework itself can be sketched out clearly.

For this reason, the programme will not work with a list of fixed, standardised meanings. That would not only be impossible, but it would also be at odds with our aims as historians; as explained above, those who wish to understand the dynamics of the events of 1945-1950 must take different perspectives into account, and this requires us to recognise the diversity of terms that is associated with them.

All of this means that we must also state precisely which term is being used by whom for which reasons, based on the awareness that many terms are evidently politically and morally loaded. That is also true of our 'analytical' concepts, which often have political connotations or roots, too, and are less 'objective' than they might first appear. For this reason, we would be wise to use terms that are as 'neutral' as possible, terms that are not to a large degree loaded or associated with specific or one-sided perspectives, for example.

This calls for a high level of discursive awareness when using terms. Throughout the programme, where necessary, we will explain the sense in which terms are being used and the perspective with which this meaning is associated, and how, for example, 'historical' terms relate to legal ones.

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⁹ It should be noted that the term 'war' has generally fallen into disuse in international law. The UN Charter refers to the 'prohibition of the use of force' in Article 2(4), and the 1949 Geneva Conventions regulate 'armed conflict'.

¹⁰ For a more detailed description, see <https://www.ind45-50.org/en/about-programme> [2020]