

## **‘Categorisation as historical discourse? Immigrants from empire’**

**Susan Legêne** (VU/CLUE/Migration and Diversity Centre)

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Dear Colleagues, the title of my presentation is: Categorisation as historical discourse? Immigrants from empire –

In my position as a professor of Political History at VU University in Amsterdam, I finally decided, last week, to focus my following presentation at the intersection of academia and politics, in order to address what I regard as our responsibility as academics in current political debates. I hope that you will want to follow me in this paper, in which I reflect on the theme of our conference in the context of the current Dutch political turmoil with respect to xenophobia and the EU, and also discuss our role as academics.

Politicians – from the Government to the local level as well as at the EU – have clearly and in outspoken ways rejected last week’s rhetoric by the extreme rightwing politician Geert Wilders– who made his followers chant that they want ‘fewer Moroccans’ in the Netherlands, and then promised them that he would make that happen. As a consequence, Wilders has run into serious trouble, which is important but certainly not the end of the story.



**Amsterdam, 22-3-2014** Photograph ANP / Remko de Waal

Last Saturday I joined the demonstration against racism. This picture of the mayor of Amsterdam was taken there. When the mayor started his speech, he became party in a noisy public negotiation with the committee ‘We are here’, that supports a group of undocumented migrants. These people actually are in big trouble. Others,

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<sup>1</sup> Presentation at the conference ‘The Eurasian Question’, organized by Marlou Schrover and Liesbeth Rosen Jacobson at Leiden University; see: <http://www.hum.leiden.edu/history/news-events/symposium-the-urasian-question.html>

with a Dutch passport, waved it as a banner, as we see here on the same photograph with the mayor, and as also happens with selfies on twitter and facebook. This separation between documented and undocumented migrants and the campaign against Dutch citizens because of their supposedly being aliens or criminals, are serious issues that, as others also have stressed in my view are closely linked to the conference topic of today. It is related to our discussion and research programmes on the legacies of colonialism for individuals, communities and nation states in South East Asia and Europe. And I would like to suggest that we end our conference with a joint statement, which without necessarily agreeing on the approaches and results of our research, somehow confirms that we as academics in sociology, anthropology, history, political sciences are sensitive to the historical background and political impact of the very categories of analysis that we develop and with which we work. That we feel responsible for a safe environment for our students and call n Wilders to stop his racist campaign.

The question mark in the title of my talk (Categorisation as historical discourse?) refers to the preliminary outcomes of historical research by some of our MA and RMA students at VU who work on issues of citizenship and immigration policies with respect to various groups of people who choose to migrate or who developed certain forms of transnational citizenship in the context of decolonization and post-colonial state formation. One project focused on those Indonesians who after 1958 looked for a last opportunity to categorically opt for Dutch citizenship; another on Chinese Indonesians who at different moments in Indonesian history between 1946 and 1980 left Indonesia or returned to Indonesia as dedicated transnational members of a specific community; another investigates Germans in the Netherlands East Indies, for whom it seemed difficult to escape from being Europeans to becoming *Ausland Deutsche*; and yet another project focuses on the Vietnamese boat refugees who were allowed to settle in the Netherlands between 1979 and 1981. In all these historical cases, we seem to find that the labeling of these migrants in the overseas context of leaving for Europe, changed after their arrival in the Netherlands. Here, the initial acknowledgement of a specific historical context for migration, became a more generalizing classification in terms of cultural specificities, ethnic labeling or normalisation. In the process, individual histories have become something private outside of public discourse and often a taboo within the family.<sup>2</sup>

Academic research has played and still plays a role in this political process of categorization in cultural terms in the context of a present which obscures historical specificities and individual histories. As academics we are well aware that in colonial times ethnic distinctions were researched in the context of ethnology, ethnography, Indology, oriental studies – you name it – and we critically investigate the knowledge-power relationships this implied and its legacies today. However these dynamics between research and politics are at play in our times as well, of course. The recent past offers various examples of the interaction between academic categories of analysis and political categories of practice. One example is social

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<sup>2</sup> Research in collaboration with MA and RMA-students Maaïke van den Berg, Annemarie Bibo, Widya Fikria Ningsih, Marieke Oprel, Wouter Reitsema, and many others.

scientists being instrumental to the introduction in the Netherlands of the conceptual distinction between allochthonous and autochthonous people, as has been reconstructed by anthropologist Peter Geschiere in his 'The perils of belonging'.<sup>3</sup> Another example is the historically motivated policy distinction between Dutch postcolonial migrants and other migrants like labor migrants or political refugees, as has been elaborated in the recent research project 'Bringing History Home' by the team of historian Gert Oostindie.<sup>4</sup> Oostindie is a close colleague and a friend but nevertheless we disagree about what I see as a methodological nationalism<sup>5</sup> underlying his Dutch-centric notions of postcolonial migrant and postcolonial bonus. To the distinction between autochthony and allochthony it adds a refinement in the category of allochthony, which 'nationalizes' the imperial past as an aspect of a Dutch history and which ignores the colonial and neocolonial background of other immigrations to the Netherlands like of Germans, Vietnamese or Moroccans, understanding such migrations as an integral part of Europe and European history.<sup>6</sup>

Allochthony and postcolonial migrants are two examples of academic research in which the interaction between analytical and political categories somehow disturbs me. And honestly speaking, the very title of this conference to me is another example where we run the risk to establish an analytical category that suggests cultural or even racial commonalities of people, while obscuring historical specificities and individual lives.



**Amsterdam, 22-3-2014**, Photograph Susan Legêne

<sup>3</sup> The Perils of Belonging. Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe. University of Chicago Press, 2009

<sup>4</sup> See website Bringing History Home: <http://awad.kitlv.nl/projects?id=165>

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, 'Methodological nationalism and beyond', *Global Networks* 2, 4 (2002) 301-334.

<sup>6</sup> My review in *BMGN-LCHR* 126:2 (2011) 54-70.

Is this a problem? Last Saturday I thought about it during the antiracism demonstration with its many slogans, songs and manifestations of both belonging and dedicated otherness. Actually I don't know the two ladies at this picture, but when I saw them walk with their slogan against ethnic labeling, I asked them whether I was allowed to make this photograph for my talk today, and they quickly produced the second slogan as well, proclaiming against Wilders that we all are Moroccans. If to them it is politically relevant to state that we are all Moroccans, how does that translate to our topic, convened here under the banner of the 'Eurasian question'? I as well applauded when at the manifestation the politician Mohamed Rabbae declared that we are all Moroccans, Jews, Lesbians, Poles, Africans, Turks, Amsterdammers and so on. He eloquently compared us with the Keukenhof, the famous and colorful Dutch flower park and he praised the Dutch spring. This makes me wonder, if I agree that we are all Moroccans today, are, historically, we all Eurasians as well? Or is the slogan only valid in the present in the political context of today's contestations about national and transnational citizenship in the Netherlands and Europe?



**De minister: "Uw plaats is ginds!" (The minister: "You belong over there!")**

*Elseviers Weekblad*, 21-11-1953, (Collection IISH-Amsterdam)

Even before the events of last week, I knew that I would approach the theme of our conference as this issue of historical ethnic labeling at the intersection of academia and politics. This was triggered by the poster to our meeting, which combines the title 'The Eurasian Question' with a political cartoon by Eppo Doeve for the Dutch weekly *Elsevier*, published on 21-11-1953. Here you see the drawing without our

poster text; it is in the collection of the IISH in Amsterdam. Honestly speaking, I don't believe that its artist Eppo Doeve, would have agreed with the poster. Doeve was born in Bandung, the Netherlands East Indies and in 1927 came to the Netherlands to study tropical agriculture at the University of Wageningen. He stayed in the Netherlands and became a well know artist and political cartoonist. The text to this drawing reads: 'The minister: "You belong over there".' This minister is Frans-Joseph van Thiel, the very first Dutch minister of Social Works. He explains with no uncertain gestures to the so-called *kleine boeng* or the lower middle class people from the Indonesian *kampung*, that access to the Netherlands is denied. The wind is blowing, he has to hold his ministerial hat, suggesting the threat that this innocent nuclear family will be followed by dozens of others.

First my reading of the cartoon: The fact that it is the first minister of Social Works that puts off this category of potential immigrants [ and not as itwuld be today the minister of Justice and immigration] leads us to what historians of the European integration discuss as the seeming paradox of that European integration. The paradox would be that the economic collaboration and integration within Europe since the 1950s enabled the development of welfare states in Europe, and thus, rather than creating one European people, strengthened the separate national states.<sup>7</sup> Europe's economic integration thus created strong nation states. This analysis, however, confirms that the many transnational bonds within Europe that originate from the impact of the common imperial past on large parts of the populations in the separate postcolonial nation states was and is repressed. The dominant national and exclusive notion of citizenship ignores or even suppresses the development of transnational commonalities within Europe, for instance between Morrocans in France and the Netherlands, or Vietnamese Boat Refugees in Germany and the Netherlands, or between people who left Indonesian in different times after 1945, 1965, or even later. The concept of Eurasiannes, in the case of our focus today, constructs imagined links, between the Netherlands and Indonesia, or Britain and India, and thus repeats imperial axes of power, rather than privileging other transnational dynamics across national borders within Europe. (The concept of imperial diaspora might be helpful here – decolonized diaspora re-colonized in order to become national citizen – cf Alison Blunt's contribution this morning).

This links to a powerful essay on 'Europe, an "unimagined" frontier of democracy' by Étienne Balibar, published in 2003 but still highly topical.<sup>8</sup> In this review essay Balibar discusses how Europe's Schengen policies set limits and constraints to citizenship in Europe, at the cost of human lives, but at the cost of the development of European democracy as well. His mention of an 'unimagined' frontier of democracy refers to Ben Anderson's famous concept of the nation state as 'imagined community'. In the imagined community of a national state, people experience a kind of belonging to each other even though it is impossible that everyone actually knows the other – the belonging is in historical understanding and the sharing of public spaces like

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<sup>7</sup> As explained in De Bruin forthcoming, with reference to Milward and others. De Bruin nuances this notion of paradox. Robin de Bruin, *Elastisch Europa. De integratie van Europa en de Nederlandse politiek, 1947-1968*. PhD Thesis defence at VU University, 9 May 2014.

<sup>8</sup> *Diacritics*; Fall 2003; 33, 3/4.

museums, procedures and rituals and finally in the acknowledgment of shared legal rights. I would say that Anderson's concept does not work in Europe after decolonization. Europe has trouble to establish a commonality among its citizens as imagined national communities let alone to understand a common European history of the imperial past, or – with some notable exceptions – its shared public spaces other than as tourist destinations. The concept of Europe does not exactly 'work' as an imagined community. Nevertheless, in spite of this lack of historical imagination, its outer borders are well defined and severely protected. Balibar emphasizes that they protect something that is 'unimagined', and this allows us to ignore the undocumented migrants even though 'they are here' as also was loudly voiced at the demonstration against racism last Saturday. My colleague at the VU Law Faculty, Thomas Spijkerboer, researches the proportionality and justice of the border regulations at Europe's outer borders. If a law results in such a massive loss of lives, is it a just law? By approaching this as an issue related to the working of Europe as an unimagined frontier of democracy as well, we can understand how European immigration policies of the past also set limits to the development of our own society. It was striking that at the demonstration of last Saturday no one ever mentioned or walked with a slogan that we all are European citizens, which is true and not just in a metaphorical sense.

Let us with this in mind, have a second look at the political drawing by Eppo Doeve. In his PhD thesis from 2009, Guno Jones has discussed the policy issues at stake in november 1953 with respect to the more or less explicit racial and class criteria for admission to the Netherlands that emerged in policies regarding the people of Dutch-Indies decent.<sup>9</sup> I will not elaborate on that now. The reason why I return to the drawing is, that in my view, Eppo Doeve is not discussing a so-called Eurasian question at all. Doeve critically addresses the racial and class distinctions made with respect to immigrants from the former Netherlands East Indies. By adding the conference title, we seem to have reversed Doeve's perspective. Now the category of Eurasians becomes a category which existed prior to Doeve making the drawing. It suggests a category that we can trace in Indonesian, Dutch, Indian, English and other societies and can compare, even though we cannot define it. And this is what disturbs me, because I do not trust Eurasian as a sound category to study individuals, communities and societies, since it seems to be framed on beforehand in terms of ethnic minorities with racial implications as well. As in the case of the so-called postcolonial migrants, I would argue that we need to deconstruct such labels, rather than adding new ones, let alone to design typologies

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<sup>9</sup> Guno Jones, *Tussen onderdanen, rijksgenoten en Nederlanders. Nederlandse politici over burgers uit Oost en West en Nederland, 1945-2005*. Amsterdam, VU) 2007 (proefschrift)