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Changing Perspectives on the Hidden Giant: An Interview with Robert Cribb

MAARTEN MANSE, SANDER TETTEROO and REMCO RABEN
E-mail: m.r.manse@law.leidenuniv.nl

Robert Cribb is in Leiden for the International Convention of Asia Scholars, held in July 2019. Despite having just arrived from Canberra, where he is professor at the Australian National University, he gladly made time for an interview over lunch. During his long career as a historian and Indonesia scholar, Cribb has traversed many different research themes, including the history of mass violence and crime, national identity, environmental politics, and historical geography of Indonesia, providing sufficient ingredients for a two-hour long conversation on the identity of scholars, students, and orangutans, bridging Europe, Australia, and Indonesia.

> "*Interviews, of course, present at least as many problems of bias as do archives, but they have provided at worst a useful supplement to and check on documentary records, and at best, when conducted in sufficient depth and volume, a significant source in their own right.*"[1]

The quote above comes from an early article of yours, published in *Itinerario* in fact, in which you reflect on interviews as a supplement to archival research and the comparative advantages and disadvantages of both in doing historical research. Drawing on thirty plus years of experience, what do you now consider solid historical methodology? In other words: what do you think makes a good historian?

That is a really good question. I think there are two central features to good historical methodology. One is close empirical attention to factuality. I grew up intellectually in the 1980s, when it was commonplace to question whether we could ever have real knowledge of anything. That questioning did us the great service of highlighting how fragile some of our certainties were and how knowledge could be embedded in power structures. But it often led to an unproductive relativism that stood in the way of intellectual debate. People constantly invoke the past to identify lessons that should guide our behaviour or to assert moral standing. In my view, historians play a critical role in subjecting those claims to close forensic analysis to see just how close to truth they may be. Without historians, all we have is a clash of opinions.

The second feature of good historical method is paying attention to context. When we try to understand that people did in the past, it is really important to examine what they

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and the people around them believed, what their material conditions were, what emotional states were the basic currency of human interaction at the time, and what they knew about the world around them, especially in terms of current affairs and scientific knowledge. Traditionally historians have mastered context by reading widely and by using sources like newspapers and archives that bring them into direct contact with context. In this respect the development of huge electronic databases of documents that can be searched by keyword has undermined some of the old process of absorbing context during the research process. The importance of context is probably the big reason why historians, unlike mathematicians, tend to improve as they get older. They become familiar with more and more of human experience and they realise that broader knowledge always feeds into understanding the context of the specific research they are doing.

Speaking of this context, you've branched out significantly as a historian and established a wide interest and expertise. What stimulated you to become interested in this broad range of topics?

Well, the basic answer is that I am just interested in all sorts of things. I feel really fortunate that Indonesian history is a relatively under-researched area. There are so many interesting topics related to Indonesia that have not yet been explored. There is really so much still to do. But it is also the case that researching violence can be draining. I have very much enjoyed the challenge of tackling different topics like orangutans or taking on different tasks like designing atlases and drawing maps as a relief from the stress of writing about violence.

But where did it start, this interest in Indonesia specifically?

It really started at high school. I had a history teacher who was studying a master's programme in Asian history at the University of Queensland, and he would feed his enthusiasm back into the class. And it happened, just after we had dealt with Indonesian history in class, I visited Indonesia with my parents. That was in 1973, early in the early Orde Baru. And so I saw statues of Diponegoro, we went through Bandung and to Yogyakarta and Madiun. It was exciting to see the places whose history I had been studying. This was also when I did my first historical research on the 1965 killings. I asked our guide in Bali: is it possible to see the doors on which were painted the letters PNI (*Partai Nasional Indonesia*; Indonesian National Party) to show that the people in the house were not communist? The guide was quite surprised and said, no, that party is not really popular any more, you can't see those doors. That was one of my earlier experiences that brought me to Indonesia.

Also, I was always interested in history, already when I had come to Europe as a child in 1966 when I was eight, nine. Later on when I began to think of an academic career (I grew up in an academic family; my grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side were botanists, both my parents are botanists, and my brother is a parasitologist), I wanted to work in

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an area that was interesting but also relevant. I knew Indonesia was quite interesting but also important to Australia, so I might have a chance of finding a job in that field. This was in the old days though, when university was completely different. If you aimed for an academic career there was a good chance it would be possible. I had no idea how much turmoil the university system would go through in my lifetime. And Indonesian history, like Asian studies in general, goes through waves of popularity in Australia. Every generation in Australia thinks that it has discovered Asia for the first time. And I grew up in one of those times, thinking that I had discovered Asia as well. But it turned out that my grandfather had been to Indonesia in 1912 as a tourist, so his generation had discovered Asia, too.

Your first research interest in Indonesia developed during your first trip to Indonesia. But when did you conduct academic research into Indonesia for the first time?

That was during my PhD candidacy. When I was an undergraduate, what fascinated me about Indonesia was the independence struggle, and how cleverly the Indonesian nationalist leaders had managed the struggle against what then appeared to be the overwhelming power of the Dutch, who were quite convinced that colonialism would be restored. So I was really impressed by the strategic thinking of people like Hatta, Sjarifuddin, Sjahrir, and Nasution, and the way they were able to snatch independence from such difficult circumstances, how they presented themselves to the outside world, how ideas of *Pancasila* covered over the many differences amongst Indonesians. Since that time, I realise that this admiration for the Indonesian independence struggle has largely disappeared from historical discourse, but when I was an undergraduate it was really an inspiration for me.

Where did this change?

I think people became disappointed with what had happened in Indonesia, especially the killings of 1965–66 and the repression of the New Order. Not that anyone was in favour of colonialism, but it appeared that Indonesia had become a disappointment. As a result, we have lost the sense of the excitement that imbued the struggle of Indonesians for independence. But maybe it also says something about Australian scholarship, which over the last couple of decades has not paid so much attention to the colonial period, but instead has focused very much on contemporary politics. Not many Australians of my generation have learnt Dutch, whereas there is a high level of fluency in Indonesian.

And how did you relate at that time to other historical schools, for instance to Dutch historiography and approaches to Indonesia?

I also saw myself as coming to Indonesian history from the point of view of politics and political aspirations, rather than from a point of view of culture, which was often a strong

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element in Dutch scholarship. It was not that I rejected the idea of using culture to understand Indonesia. But what was most interesting about Indonesia to me was its modern dimension, rather than its traditions. When I started to work on Indonesia, I was not interested at all in Dutch colonial policy. Over the years, however, I became much more interested in colonial issues, and it is an area I would like to look at more closely. It is often not done very well by outsiders, while Dutch scholars approach it for a domestic rather than an external audience. So there is a real gap in scholarship. But there is a new wave of scholarship looking at specific themes, rather than organisations, individuals, or broad historical periods. By looking at problems in Indonesian colonial history that have broader implications, we can help to set Indonesia in a global context.

We know you as a very cautious speaker. Would you brand Dutch approaches to Indonesian history as slightly parochial?

Not always cautious, I'm afraid. But yes, I think that is true to some extent. I am not sure if it is a wilful parochialism; it is driven also by the abundance of sources here in the Netherlands; it is quite rare to find Dutch scholars of Indonesia who look beyond the Dutch material to other colonial cases, just as it is quite rare for big international scholars to examine the Dutch colonial case seriously. It's not a specifically Dutch problem; in Australian history writing as well, there is a reluctance to look beyond Australia. I sense that one of the problems is that Australian historians are apprehensive about what they might find if they subject Australia to real international comparison. This might also be the case in the Netherlands.

So you started by looking at Jakarta in the 1940s. Was it a very logical thing to do to look at eyewitnesses and people involved?

I did not start with strong ideas of what I was going to do for my PhD research in London. I wanted to examine the Indonesian revolution, but I did not have a precise topic. It was the suggestion of my supervisor, Ruth McVey, that I look at Jakarta. I found that an interesting idea because it raised the moral issue of collaboration and compromise by nationalists in the city. The bolder nationalists had gone to Yogyakarta where they waved the flag and sang "Indonesia Raya"; but nationalists in Jakarta were in a difficult position. They were surrounded by British and later Dutch troops, they had to deal with British and Dutch authorities and all the while try to work out what was in the best interests of the Republic. How do you deal with challenges like that? I have always been interested in historical circumstances that confront people with difficult moral choices.

I began my PhD in the days before coursework, so I made my first visit to the British archives just a few weeks after starting my enrolment. I can still remember finding a small detail that Ben Anderson had got wrong in his landmark study of the early revolution, *Java in a Time of Revolution*. It was a minor point—nothing that mattered for any argument—but it helped give me the confidence that I was at the coalface of research.

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Then I came to what was then the Algemeen Rijksarchief, now the Nationaal Archief. It had just moved from its old premises in Bleijenburg near the centre of The Hague to a shiny new building near the Central Station. More important for me, the "*Indische*" archives had just been opened, in 1980. And the most important source for me was the archive of the *Algemene Secretarie* and the *Procureur-Generaal.* They had been inventoried but not sorted, so opening every file was a bit of an adventure. While I was working through these archives in the Netherlands, I started to find reports about the *Lasykar Rakyat*, the people's militia which had emerged out of the underworld of prewar Batavia's gangsters. At first they were just a curiosity, but then I began looking at them in more detail and they ended up being part of the dissertation. I was fortunate that there was a group of young Dutch historians working in the archives at the same time. We would have coffee together and every week there was a so-called *Loempiaclub* lunch at a Chinese restaurant. I was able to practice my spoken Dutch and I began to develop connections with Dutch academic life.

What was specifically the state of the field in your interest specialisation, on the Indonesia revolution? How was it politically seen? Were you in any way seen as an interloper?

I have to say there have been occasional moments that indeed I felt that I was seen as an interloper. People would ask in surprise why an Australian might be interested in Indonesia, whereas in Australia it makes perfect sense to be interested in our large neighbouring country. But mostly I have felt welcomed by the Dutch academic world and I have great admiration for the depth of knowledge of my contemporaries here. It made a difference that I spoke Dutch. Over lunch and coffee I would always speak Dutch. Of course, it is an effort to speak a language you are not familiar with, but my friends were patient and helpful in answering questions about grammar and usage. In the end, my Dutch was okay. From time to time, I fret that I am not told the day-to-day gossip about Indonesianist circles in the Netherlands, but that may not be a bad thing.

Concerning the first part of the question, at the time I began my PhD, several people were doing work on the revolution on specific regions: Aceh, West Sumatra, Banten, Pekalongan, East Java, Bali, South Sulawesi, Ambon. Each person had his or her own take on the revolution, so the studies were not exactly parallel. Nonetheless, it appeared that regional studies of the revolution was where it was all happening. But then we all graduated, and it stopped. The regional dimension of the revolution turned out to be a cul-de-sac. It did not spark a new set of research questions, and several regions are "not done," though some of the gaps will very likely be filled by current projects in the Netherlands.

What do you think of these projects? Are they a continuation of the parochial Dutch approach or do they go into a new direction concerning research into violence in Indonesia? And how do they relate to Australian or other international scholarships?

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The ODGOI Programme,[2] in which I am involved as an adviser, is a massive project to re-examine the independence struggle from both sides. A core focus of the programme is the violence that was carried out by both sides. At the first meeting of the advisory committee, someone made the comment that the Netherlands had always been seen as the best colonial power and that the ODGOI researchers have to be willing to disagree with that perception. The comment really surprised me, because outside the Netherlands there is no perception that the Netherlands was the best colonial power. In the Anglophone world, I think, the perception of Dutch colonialism is overwhelmingly negative, and Dutch colonial policy is unreasonably dismissed as no more than greed and brutality. In comparison, the international judgement of Anglophone imperialisms is not necessarily positive, but it is much more nuanced and complex.

The Australian view of Dutch colonialism tends to be aligned with Indonesian views, which tend to see Dutch colonialism as oppressive. I have the feeling that in Australia I am seen as too sympathetic to Dutch colonialism, whereas in the Netherlands I am seen as unnecessarily critical. The *Grote atlas van Nederlands Oost-Indië*, which is a wonderful resource, commented in its preface that my *Historical Atlas of Indonesia* had dealt with the main themes of Indonesian history "extensively and in a well-balanced manner. However, this does not apply to the events during World War II and the subsequent period until 1949, which Cribb discusses rather scantily and one-sidedly, the latter in particular by not including a well-considered Dutch view of this era." I have to admit that I was quite pleased to read that criticism.[3]

Additionally, I believe comparison between British rule in India, Burma, and Malaya and Dutch rule in Indonesia is very productive. Modern colonial states had to rule in similar ways, so when there were the differences the outcomes were often important for the subsequent development of colonised societies. I think this has had an impact. For instance, think of the comparative colonialism project that *Itinerario* published. It is not a closed world, but I think there still is a parochial or nationalist element, coined as "Vaderlandse Geschiedenis." This is, by the way, a problem here in the Netherlands, but certainly also in Australia.

When it comes to comparative discussions, for instance on the fate of indigenous peoples, Australian parochialism exists as well: in Australia it is quite the same. Scholars are willing to make comparisons with New Zealand and Canada but they hesitate to look farther afield. In the Australian case, parochialism is exacerbated by the fact that there are not so many scholars in other parts of the world looking at Australian history.

Could more comparative cases be made with genocide studies, between Dutch and other colonialisms, for instance as Dirk Moses did? What are the genocidal aspects of history of the revolution, and are comparisons between Dutch and other colonialisms to be made?

Looking back at my first work on Indonesia, I am struck by how blind I was to violence as an analytical issue. I was interested in criminality and in issues of justice associated with

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the anti-colonial struggle, but I did not pay attention to violence and certainly not to broader issues like genocide. I was more interested in the Jakarta gangsters as a social formation which became important to the revolution, because of the circumstances of the time. In the book that came from the thesis, I mention violence against Eurasians and Chinese, but it was tangential to the main argument. Only when I started to become interested in the 1965 killings did I begin think more broadly about the issue of violence. My work on the killings began when I was planning for a conference in Canberra in 1988 and thinking about the gaps in our understanding about contemporary or modern Indonesia. I realised that we needed to know more about 1965. Everyone knew that something terrible had happened but there was very little serious work to pin down just what it was. After the conference I contacted other people who were interested in the topic, and then it grew into an edited book. So that project emerged very much in response to what I thought was needed in the field, rather than as a development from my previous work. But of course, having started to think conceptually about violence, I looked back at the revolutionary period and saw the violence of that time with fresh eyes.

Looking at the 1965 killings forced me to think about the definition of genocide. I ended up concluding that the exclusion of political killings from genocide is a mistake, because political identity is a form of national identity. The UN Genocide Convention defines genocide as an attempt to destroy a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. Seeing mass political killings as genocide brought me back to the revolution as the period in which the Indonesia national identity was defined. It highlighted for me the exclusion of Eurasians (*Indos*) and Chinese from full, unqualified citizenship of Indonesia, and encouraged me to see that exclusion as one of the key political decisions made at the time.

You have termed this the "brief genocide." Is that still the term you would use?

I do not repudiate it, but now I possibly would not describe it as a genocide because I have concluded that the number of people killed was smaller than I suggested at the time. But that violence was still a determined attempt to exclude a group of people from national identity, accompanied by large-scale killing. That insight in turn led me to become interested in the Indo-nationalism of the nineteenth century, as a kind of settler colonial nationalism which has similarities to Australian nationalism in the same era. That Indo-nationalism, however, was cut off and replaced with a much more indigenously focused nationalism.

Australian nationalism in that era involved repudiating imperial identity and constructing a local identity which was particularly connected to the natural environment, often accompanied by sentimental parts about eucalyptus and the Australian landscape, just as Indo-nationalists were sentimental about volcanos and rice fields. In both cases, this early nationalism embodied the idea creating a better society than that of the homeland. I became interested in the idea that a place of exile could became a place of social progress.

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What about relations to Dutch colonial violence?

That is still a big, unresolved question. In some respects, I have been circling around that issue by looking at Japanese wartime violence. Part of my reason for looking at Japanese war crimes is that they are so well documented because of the vast scale of postwar investigations and the huge body of diary and memoir literature. My work with Japan specialists also means that we can use Japanese material which I would not be able to read myself. This abundance of evidence gives me an opportunity to look analytically at what happened during the Japanese period in Southeast Asia, in ways that are not possible for the 1965 killings or indeed for Dutch colonial violence. The Japanese case is also useful because most observers take a hard line on Japanese culpability for war crimes, whereas the impulse to find excuses is a lot stronger when it comes to violence carried out by Western powers. Once again, I am interested in the moral ambiguities that arise from acts of violence.

The project on Japanese wartime violence is not yet finished, but our provisional conclusion is that a great deal of violence arose from of the strained circumstances of the war. The Second World War was a harsh, difficult conflict, people were in very difficult circumstances and they did all sorts of things that had terrible consequences for those around them. Many of the Japanese who were held responsible for war crimes were simply out of their depth. Japanese-occupied Indonesia was a long way from the frontline, so a posting there was not a good career move. The Japanese soldiers and officials sent to Java, with exceptions of course, were not the most capable. This observation is important. Out of their depth, many of them had no particular intent to commit crimes, but their action and inaction had terrible consequences. But the chaotic circumstances of the war also gave licence to all sorts of psychopaths. I have no idea whether there were more psychopaths in the Japanese military forces than in the Dutch colonial army, but because of the general disorder there are a lot of opportunities for psychopaths to be psychopathic. The lack of order and control was crucial in making this possible.

Is this a tangential theme in Indonesian administration, compared to Dutch colonialism?

Yes, there is strong similarity. I am inclined to say there was no significant direct legacy from the colonial period in terms of traditions of violence, but instead there was a legacy of conditions that tended to lead to outbreaks of violence. Colonial Indonesia was a relatively fragile, underprovided society with a relatively weak infrastructure, and when it came under pressure things started to fall apart and the opportunity for violence emerged. In that sense I have moved somewhat away from my previous vision of the late colonial state in Indonesia.[4] Quite a lot of what the late colonial state was trying to do was to avoid seeing what was going on and to avoid having to be involved.

One of the broad features of Dutch colonialism is that, despite all of the talk about a "panopticon," an all-seeing colonial Leviathan, the colonial state did to want to take on

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all the responsibilities that a metropolitan state did for its citizens or subjects. They were keen not to be responsible. And one way of not being responsible is not to know—even if the colonial state was strong in military terms. I have always thought that the distinction strong/weak state a bit problematic, because the term strong state conjures up the idea of a brutal state. But a brutal state is not necessarily strong. A weak state can be a brutal state. It was for instance the weakness of the Japanese administration which led the Japanese garrisons in wartime Indonesia to resort to violence.

Could this also be a choice? Dan Slater and Diana Kim signalled that the world was also riddled with standoffish states (instead of standardising states as described by Scott) that chose to hold off deliberately.[5] Or phrased differently, how do you look at power, and the distinction between formal and informal power?

I make the distinction between formal and informal power all the time, but I am not sure I have a good conceptualisation of it. I find it a challenge to achieve the right balance between recognising the power of structures and appreciating historical contingency—the things that happen because of decisions made in the heat of the moment. I have no problem with making generalisations. I do it all the time, particularly in lectures. Part of the task of historians is to create a grand picture of long-term trends and that inevitably means thinking structurally. But in research-based writing we need to be more careful to ground our conclusions in evidence.

Would you say maybe that you try to understand what drives people rather than what creates power structures?

Yes, that's probably the case. This interest also emerged in my study of the cultural history of orangutans. The core theme of the book was the nature of the distinction that humans have understood as separating them from orangutans. It first it was to do with intellect; later the distinction focused on physiology; still later it shifted back to intelligence and even to emotional capacity. One of the recurrent issues raised by thinkers about this difference was whether the human propensity for violence is derived from our animal nature or whether it is a consequence of civilisation (or some combination of the two).

This project came about because of my interest in natural history. After I graduated, I led natural history tours to Indonesia. And I noticed there was a lot being done in Indonesian national parks that just didn't fit with the perception that the New Order was destroying the environment. And so I started to look at the politics and history of nature conservation in Indonesia. It was an interesting experience because whereas I found fellow scholars were often interested in and liked my research on violence, nobody liked my work on the history of conservation. I think it was partly because environmental studies tends to be a much more divided field than history. It's also a field in which political disagreements are even stronger

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than in history. When I wrote about the politics of conservation, I offended people who thought conservation shouldn't be political, it should be a matter of principle. I offended people who thought I was giving too rosy a picture of what was happening. But I persisted to some extent and at one stage applied for a grant on conservation politics in Indonesia going back to the colonial period. I didn't get it but I happened to discuss my unsuccessful application with a colleague in English literature who was interested in animals in literature and we decided to put together a project on orangutans. This time we got the grant and were later joined by a third colleague whose field was theatre studies. In some ways it turned out to be one of the worst experiences of my academic career, and of my colleagues' careers as well, because we discovered that the disciplinary gap between history and literature is huge. My colleagues were very frustrated with me because I insisted on being able to justify claims with evidence and because I was unimaginative in interpreting literature. I was very frustrated with them for the same reasons. We almost didn't get a book together, but in the end we did and now we're on very good terms. The book did several things, but one of the core things it did was ask how we draw that line between humans and orangutans.

Reflecting on the broad research scope and career behind you, if you had to typify the nature of how violence is used in Indonesia from Dutch colonialism, the Japanese occupation, the Indonesian revolution, to the Independence period, what would you say are the major shifts in how violence manifests itself?

The most important long-term trend, and in many ways the least desirable trend, is the move towards clandestine and intense violence, towards secret torture. The violence of earlier times was more open and I think it was generally less planned. A significant amount was poorly thought reaction to unexpected circumstances, rather than deliberately planned violence. But I think the trend has been away from that more understandable, perhaps even more excusable violence, to a really dangerous underbelly of clandestine and highly intense violence.

What has been your experience doing archival research on this in Indonesia? What has changed over the past decades?

Since I completed my PhD, I haven't had a research permit for Indonesia. So I've only used archives there very briefly where I can get short-term access. Overall, it is easier to carry out archival research in the Netherlands or in London or Australia. I use my visits to Indonesia above all to watch what is going on and to talk to people. I have gradually become conscious that I interact with people differently as I get older. When I was still doing my PhD, I was young. I could talk to people in a very different kind of way than they expect me to talk to them now, as a professor. Every interview is a separate event. But people tend to be more formal with me now. That's probably partly because of my old-fashioned Indonesian language, which is still somewhat embedded in the language of the 1940s, which I first used when I was doing research in the 1980s. Then

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it was a bit out of date, now it's even more so. And I'm older, greyer, so people are more respectful and less forthcoming and less inclined to let go and talk. This is more pronounced in Indonesia than in the Netherlands or Australia.

And what has been your experience entering the country, travelling around, really your general impression of Indonesia over the past decades? How did the places you visited change?

There are two things that strike me. First, Indonesia is much more frantically busy. My memory of 1980s is of a relatively tranquil place in comparison with the present. There was significantly less traffic. The only way of getting around Jakarta was the *bis kota* (city bus). The buses would never stop for me, they would slow down and I had to just jump off. I remember the environs of the Indonesian National Archives as semirural. I did have a bit of culture shock when I arrived in Jakarta for my research, because I had been using maps of Jakarta from 1945. The city had grown a lot since then, and even though I had not lived there before I was still conscious of the transformation that has been going on ever since.

Indonesia seems still somewhat of a hidden giant, and finds itself a "focal" country on international research agendas, yet it seems increasingly hard to find fully specialised staff, for instance people who read original languages. Focus seems to be lost. How do we put Indonesia back on the map for universities and also for students?

There are two questions. How can we sustain that kind of deep country specialisation? And then there is the separate question of why Indonesia is so neglected. I am afraid that sustaining deep country specialisation will be difficult, and it is especially worrying if the capacity to read older texts disappears. But if knowledge of Indonesia is spread more widely over a number of scholars with different disciplinary approaches, we may not be so much worse off.

The neglect of Indonesia is another matter. I've come to a theory that Indonesia is neglected because we Indonesianists describe it in a depressing way. It goes back to what I said earlier about my coming to Indonesia because of excitement over the independence struggle. It's actually very rare to find that kind of enthusiasm for Indonesia as an enterprise. Many years ago, Colin Brown and I did a little book called *Modern Indonesia*. One of the referee's reports, which was evidently by someone who knew nothing about Indonesia, said "I hadn't realised Indonesia's history was so depressing." It wasn't our intention. Unfortunately I have the same feeling when I read the general histories of Merle Ricklefs and Adrian Vickers. They are very good books, but the picture that they give of Indonesia is discouraging.[6]

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We are perhaps all kind of gravitating towards the issue of violence, certainly now that 1965 has become a major topic of research . . .

I think that the sense of disappointment with Indonesia goes well beyond violence. It is influenced by the perception that corruption is endemic. We haven't managed to work out a way of conjuring up a sense of aspiration and excitement in real Indonesian politics that can make new students feel good about studying Indonesia.

Is there a role for history in the contemporary generation of Indonesia?

My general impression is that Indonesians, and for that matter Australians, are not particularly historically minded. They are inclined not to look much at the past but to focus on the future. Now, that can be quite liberating, if you don't feel the burden of the past. But in both countries we find that people conjure up specific aspects of the past in ways that don't help the future. They treat the past as evidence of Indonesia's inability to progress. That's unfortunate, and I think it is a mistaken lesson.

How much do Australian high school students learn about Indonesian history?

Attention to Indonesia comes and goes in the Australian school system, but it's probably been in retreat for some time and that's particularly due to a shortage of teaching materials. There are well developed materials for Australian history and European history but much less material for Asian history, and within Asian history even less for Indonesia. There are quite a lot of teachers who make an extra effort to include Indonesia in the curriculum. It's just not a core part of the curriculum. On the other hand, the names of Indonesian leaders appear in headlines in Australian newspapers. It's encouraging evidence that Australians in general stay aware of the major developments in Indonesia.

How do you perceive the Dutch postcolonial experience as represented in museums, media, or books?

I am struck now by the depth of the division between the romantic view of the Indies and the self-critical stream in Dutch society. These two camps have been present since I first began to visit the Netherlands, but the division between them seems to have become sharper. In fact something similar has happened in Australia, over the issue of historical treatment of Aborigines. Those who regard Australia's history as genocidal and those who see it as relatively benevolent hardly talk to each other. On the other hand, the history of Australian colonialism in Papua New Guinea is almost completely absent. It is barely mentioned in the standard histories, because it was never particularly important to us economically or symbolically.

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To what extent are you inspired by or informed by postcolonial concerns in history?

Postcolonialism as an approach was really important in opening our eyes to the psychological scars that can be left on a society by the experience of being colonised. It was a rebuke to the smug self-confidence of an older generation of scholars who emphasised the "civilising" power of colonialism. But it is often used carelessly to create a simple dichotomy between scholars from the West and those from former colonies. It ignores both class and internal colonialism in new states. And its characterisation of colonialism tends to be too simple. My criticism is not of the major postcolonial theorists but of those who take up their ideas without their subtlety. There's been a bit of a controversy recently in Australia. A Chinese-Indonesian woman[7] has written a piece criticising the Western literary establishment for ignoring avant-garde Indonesian writing. She expresses her criticism not by arguing for the value of that writing but by claiming it has been erased by Western interests. I find her article problematic because the people she is criticising include people like John McGlynn[8] who have lived in Indonesia much longer than she has and who have demonstrated a close attachment to the country and its people. She claims a credential to speak on behalf of avant-garde writers by virtue of her descent, whereas I believe that arguments have to stand and fall on the basis of their own strength, not on the basis of who may be putting them forward.

At the core of my unease with postcolonial arguments is the extent to which they are based on implicit or even explicit racial classifications. I see exclusive racial classification as a hugely damaging historical phenomenon which underpinned slavery, colonialism, and fascism. Intellectuals and activists have worked hard for two centuries to demolish the idea that racial difference is an objective reality. The rise of the radical right shows that the threat of exclusive racial classification is still very much alive, and I believe that abandoning the struggle against it for the sake of minor symbolic advantage is dangerous.

The Dutch postcolonial debate has become very fierce over the last decade, but our position as historians in public debate sometimes seems quite weak. We seem to have poor answers to the kind of pressure dealt with, and tend to be overly nuanced. How can historians contribute more productively to societal debates without reverting to clichéd nuances?

I think at a certain point historians do have to stand up for their disciplinary principles. But we shouldn't be tempted to be polemical just because it's the only way to be heard. My own experience is that historians are not listened to because we are spoilers: we demolish the simple historical propositions that non-historians like to put forward. I'm never in favour of avoiding an argument, but many moral issues are complicated and the answers are not obvious. It's always a challenge to explain complexities to an audience that expects simple answers, and we won't always get it right. Still, you can simplify a lot while still having a significant element of nuance, or insert elements of doubt or

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uncertainty into the self-assurance of people on either side. It also helps, I find, to listen carefully to what non-historians say about history. Sometimes people are completely wrong, but very often there is a core of truth on which people are willing to build.

At the moment I am very much interested in the question of transmitted historical guilt. Who bears the guilt for things that were done in the past? Just who are the moral heirs of the perpetrators and victims? Is there an objective basis for reckoning, or does it depend entirely on what the perpetrator side is willing to do and what the victim side is willing to accept? How far back in history do obligations extend?

Recently the city council of Amsterdam issued formal apologies to those affected by slavery. It led to one of many rounds of discourse in the past few years on whether or not the city now or government now or people now should in some way apologise or somehow admit to this "historically transmitted guilt."

I think the problem is that no one thinks that slavery was morally acceptable, but that alongside the offer and acceptance of apology for the past is a feeling that the heirs of the perpetrators continue to be morally tainted by the past, whether or not they apologise. On the surface, apology looks like a resolution, but in practice it sets up a present-day moral imbalance that many people find discomforting because that imbalance cannot easily be resolved. On this kind of issue, a comparative approach is really useful. As far as possible, we need to apply roughly the same principles of accountability globally so that apology is not used selectively. A couple of years ago I spoke to a genocide studies conference where I compared Japan in 1941 and the PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*; Indonesian communist party) in 1965 as institutions whose leaders had attempted a rash and in the end self-destructive initiative. The attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the 1965 coup in Indonesia were immediately condemned as acts of treachery. Ordinary people in Japan and ordinary members of the PKI had no role in the decisions, but they suffered enormously as a result. Today, however, ordinary people from these institutions are still expected to bear guilt. In the West, we tend to think communists today shouldn't be blamed for the action of their leaders in 1965. Why would we think the Japanese should bear guilt for the actions of their leaders in 1945? So, I'm very much in favour of applying moral principles but it is critically important to avoid hypocrisy and to apply those principles consistently.

Still, one of the more important questions raised by the postcolonial school is not so much admitting guilt, but also acknowledging particular issues that had long been ignored, for instance, in the Netherlands. Do you think there is still a lot to acknowledge that has been ignored by historians or have we covered most of the important issues so far?

I suppose I'm always a bit uneasy with the rebuke that a topic has been neglected. The importance of different issues changes over time. We can recognise that now is the moment

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to deal with a topic without implying that there was some conspiracy of silence in earlier periods. If a historian feels that a topic has not received proper attention, then the solution is to do the research that brings it before the broader community. I feel particularly uneasy about the insistence that particular topics should be emphasised in textbooks, because the general effect of prescribing textbook contents has been negative rather than positive. So actually I'm inclined to support an open market of ideas in the academic world.

What drives this open market?

Fortunately, there is very little direct censorship in the Western academic world, despite the calls for control. Nonetheless, there is a lot of relatively conformist behaviour amongst scholars. Despite the constant calls for innovation, many people tackle established topics in a fairly straightforward way. The study of violence in Indonesia has become a mainstream topic that now doesn't require any particular initiative or daring to join. There is still a lot of valuable work to do, but the paradigms have been set. Something the same applies to postcolonial theory. I think you need to have people who are willing to stand up against the mainstream and offer alternatives. Within my limits, I try to do that.

Do you have any plans for this, for instance after your retirement?

I have always kept a list of future projects and it has always been too long for me to have any hope of finishing it all. My father is still publishing at 93 and I hope I can keep going for some time. One of the things that I'm interested in is Dutch colonialism and trying to say something about Dutch colonialism that will be useful for the outside world. I would not try to compete with Dutch scholarship, but I think there is a place for an interpretative work that presents the Dutch colonial story with greater nuance than is generally the case.

A small hint?

I think the really interesting thing in understanding the Netherlands Indies is the question of how a relatively small power ruled such a large archipelago. Violence is only a part of that story. The management of existing institutions, and the creation and constant reinvention of institutions is a big part of it. Turning that into something that is interesting and accessible, that is one of the things that I'd like to do.

I am still very much interested in the moral complexities of history and I also want to write something about the issue of historical guilt that considers the phenomenon of black legends, that is episodes in the past that have been portrayed as exceptionally bad, even though they were not necessarily so much worse than the events that surround them. I'm interested in the problem of balancing good and bad. When Suharto died, I was struck by the general absence of balanced obituaries. He was summed up either as

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corrupt and brutal or as the father of Indonesian development. Putting the two elements into the same picture appeared to be impossible. I also hope to have funding for a project to look at the politics of Japanese guilt in East and Southeast Asia. That is the project that will follow the project on the Japanese war crimes. I would really like to go back and write afresh about the violence in 1945 and 1965, especially using some of the insights into collective behaviour that come from the new field of history of emotions. And I still enjoy drawing maps.

What should researchers working on other parts of Asia draw from scholarship such as your own on Indonesia? What kind of topics merit attention that Indonesia draws attention to?

The answer to the first question is that I'm really struck by the importance of legal pluralism in Indonesia in undermining the sense of rule of law and undermining the sense of a common identity. I'm inclined to see legal pluralism as a quite a dangerous arrangement, whereas many people in Australia are actually quite sympathetic to the idea. So that is probably one of the more important political lesson I would draw.

I think in many other parts of Asia, particularly East Asia, there is a very strong inclination towards tying nationalism unproblematically to ethnic identity. Indonesia clearly doesn't work with a simple link between national identity and ethnicity. And I think it's useful to look at the Indonesian case and at the choices that were made to include some groups while excluding others. This approach reminds us of the contingency of national identity. More broadly, one of the things I try to make clear to my students is how recent it is that things were different. The world we see now has not been set in stone for hundreds of years, let alone thousands of years. Looking at changes in borders is one way of highlighting the volatility of the way in which ethnic identity is constructed. The underlying fascination of Indonesia is that so many ethnic groups ended up becoming a nation that a great many people passionately belong to. Understanding how this happened can help us understand many other parts of the world.

Notes

1 R. B. Cribb, "Archives, Interviews and Indonesian History," *Itinerario* 7:2 (1983): 50–58.

2 The research programme *Onafhankelijkheid, Dekolonisatie, Geweld en Oorlog in Indonesië (Independence, decolonisation, violence, and war in Indonesia)* is carried out by the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (*Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde*, KITLV) in cooperation with the *Netherlands Institute* for *Military History (NIMH) and the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD).*

3 J. R. van Diessen and Paul van den Brink, *Grote atlas van Nederlands Oost-Indië*, 6. Zierikzee: Asia Maior/Utrecht: KNAG, 2004.

4 R. B. Cribb, "Introduction: The Late Colonial State in Indonesia," in *The Late Colonial State in Indonesia: Political and Economic Foundations of the Netherlands Indies, 1880–1942*, edited by R. B. Cribb, 1–9. Leiden: KITLV, 1994.

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5 D. Slater and D. Kim, "Standoffish States: Nonliterate Leviathans in Southeast Asia. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 3:1 (2015): 25–44; James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998; Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009.

6 R. B. Cribb and C. Brown, *Modern Indonesia: A History since 1945.* London: Longman,1995; M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia: c. 1300 to the Present.* London: Macmillan, 1981; Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

7 Tiffany Tsao, "Why Are Indonesians Being Erased from Indonesian Literature?" Electric Literature (website), 11 April 2019. https: //electricliterature.com/indonesian-translation-colonialism/.

8 John McGlynn is a translator of Indonesian-language literature.

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