

Annual Leiden Terra Incognita Lecture

Circulation as Relational History

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Abstract: Ever since its institutionalisation as a university discipline in the course of the 19th century, history — along with the vast majority of social sciences — have been entrapped in “methodological nationalism”, the assumption that nations are the natural units for study, thus equating society with the nation-state, and conflating national interests with the purposes of the social sciences. Questions thus very often get reduced to explanations limited to national parameters without taking account of broader dynamics. In the context of nations that gained independence from European colonialist in the post-WW II era, Postcolonial Studies have sought to engage with this nationalist straightjacket by attempting to situate their histories, especially during the colonial period, as a process of resistance to European imperial domination and imposition of the latter’s outlook and values. However, a number of questions and issues are thus blindsided in this systematically agonistic perspective, or for that matter in its opposite, a free-flowing diffusionist model based on a simple-minded Whiggish model of progress. In light of the fact that human societies, past and present, are constantly interacting with each other together with the phenomenon of human migrations, a number of new historiographical approaches that attempt to engage with these “relational” processes have emerged in the last decades.

This talk will start with a presentation of some of the most prominent amongst such propositions – comparative history, *histoire carrefour*, *histoire croisée*, connected history, circulatory history... – before developing the last one, including its areas of applicability, in some detail. As an illustration of the workings of this approach, the talk will focus on a case-study in the context of the European encounter with South Asia – the making of the monumental *Hortus Indicus Malabaricus* commissioned in the 1670s by the military commander of the then Dutch colony of Kochi, and its iterations in subsequent Indo-European interactions.