

Henk J. van Rinsum, *Universiteit Utrecht en koloniale kennis. Bestuderen, bemeten en beleren sinds 1636* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2023, 352 pp., isbn 9789464562002).

English version will be published shortly under the title:

*Utrecht University and Colonial Knowledge Exploration, Exploitation and the Civilising Mission since 1636*

Henk van Rinsum begins his study on the colonial history of Utrecht University with a personal note. From 1976 to 2000, he worked at the university's international office, focusing on 'university development cooperation' (p. 13). His career is therefore intertwined with the history he describes. In fact, this book is the culmination of a career-long reflection on 'development,' with increasing discomfort about the role of Western universities in this area.

The central question in this book is how scientific development at Utrecht University has been intertwined with Dutch colonial history. Throughout, Van Rinsum continually questions the assumption that Western science is superior to other knowledge systems—an idea that emerged from the Enlightenment.

The book is divided into four time periods, from the founding of Utrecht University in 1636 to the 1990s, with the author highlighting different academic fields in each period, each corresponding to one or two chapters. The chapters focus on the activities of individuals in the colonies, particularly in the Dutch East Indies, and in the Netherlands at the university itself, with less emphasis on institutional structures.

Van Rinsum characterizes the early modern period as an era of 'Instructing & Converting' and 'Exploring & Classifying.' In the seventeenth century, theology was the most important discipline, which led to a campaign to spread the faith, as religion needed to be disseminated. At the same time, Utrecht botanists, among others, began collecting, organizing, and classifying what, from Utrecht's perspective, was a foreign world.

From the nineteenth century onward, Van Rinsum describes a period of 'Experimenting & Exploiting' and argues that it was primarily the natural sciences that benefited from connections with the colonies. Science became more empirical during this period, with the tropical environment serving as a laboratory. He characterizes the twentieth century, finally, as a period of 'Educating & Controlling.' In this period, the university's goals became intertwined with those of the colonial regime, though the author specifically refers to Utrecht's Indology program, which was established in 1925. Van Rinsum's research primarily relies on existing literature and published academic work by Utrecht scientists through the centuries. The contribution of his work lies mainly in how he brings these sources together and questions the coloniality that is tied to them.

The book begins with two chapters on the early modern period, but its main focus is on the period after 1800. It also includes several thematic chapters on the university and slavery, the so-called 'oil faculty,' and education in the colonies. The final chapter offers a reflection on the interplay between power, knowledge, and the notion of superiority that Van Rinsum criticizes.

In this reflection, the author returns to the core of his argument: the superiority mindset has, at best, made Western scholars blind to their own positionality, and, at worst, fostered contempt toward the 'other,' enabling oppression and economic exploitation. Van Rinsum does not spare himself in this critique; he reflects on his own role as a 'secular missionary' who came to spread the Western scientific gospel in the latter half of the twentieth century. This self-critique is admirable.

The two chapters on the Indology faculty contain the most thorough analysis. They clearly illustrate how deeply business and academia became intertwined in the training of colonial civil servants for the Dutch East Indies. Additionally, Van Rinsum nuances the existing historiographic view that the 'ethical' Leiden and the 'conservative' Utrecht operated fundamentally differently in this regard, while also highlighting how closely the Utrecht faculty became linked to the rise of European fascism in the 1920s. Several professors were committed fascists (Pierson), members of the NSB (Dutch Nazi Party) (Westra), or advocates of the Greater Netherlands movement who defended the colonial war in Indonesia from 1945 to 1949 (Gerretson). Although this is not entirely new information—Van Rinsum bases his text on secondary sources—it has not previously been so clearly connected to both the colonial history and the history of Utrecht University. The Indology faculty was a place where these ideologies could develop further, as colonialism, fascism, and capitalism converged here as intellectual movements. Nevertheless, the author mainly confines himself to compiling this information without explicitly drawing conclusions from it.

However, precisely because of this clear link between the colonial business sector, the university, and conservative racial political beliefs, it is regrettable that an in-depth analysis of the racial hierarchy that enabled and continues to enable scientific superiority thinking is absent. While the chapter on the university and slavery does offer a sharp analysis of how Voetius increasingly equated the exclusivity of the Protestant individual with that of the white individual, the implications of this racial epistemological regime remain underexplored. Van Rinsum largely fails to point out that this was pure colonial racism, which rendered 'the other' as inferior.

This colonial racism has also left deep traces in today's university. Research into the colonial histories of universities started late, partly because they are still largely bastions of white scholars. Van Rinsum also points out this lack of what he calls 'cultural diversity.' Additionally, he occasionally takes the time to describe the role of Indonesian and Surinamese students in Utrecht. This is an important contribution, but it also highlights a clear task for new historical research, particularly regarding the daily lives of these students. Van Rinsum mainly discusses them in terms of their individual contributions and careers, under separate headings, but largely omits an analysis of the (absent) role of Utrecht University in bringing these students together, or of how they related to the university and colonial power structures.

The choice to repeatedly describe individual figures and episodes allows the book to bring together a large amount of information, but this sometimes comes at the expense of highlighting connections between people and events. The question of colonial power relations—one of the main focuses of colonial history research in recent decades—occasionally fades away entirely. The focus on individuals is partly due to the fact that the university, especially in the early modern period, was much smaller than in the twentieth century, meaning individuals had a greater influence on institutional history.

For this reason, it is regrettable that institutional structures and colonial power relations, aside from reflections on superiority thinking, remain underexplored, and that the role of Utrecht University as a colonial institution sometimes fades into the background. Colonialism and colonial science entail more than just notions of superiority; they also involve the oppression of humans, animals, and plants. These two aspects are, of course, closely related, but even when scientists did not explicitly endorse a philosophy of oppression, they often participated in it, and it influenced their findings—such as in the case of Christiaan Eijkman, who conducted research on the causes of beriberi among the indigenous population in the Dutch East Indies. The indigenous people who were the subjects of the research are largely left out of the book (pp. 170-173).

The fact that universities have been relatively slow to engage in this kind of research—though studies are now underway in Leiden, Amsterdam, and Wageningen—is partly due to the complex histories of different academic disciplines, individuals, and institutional structures. Unlike direct financial flows from the colonies, colonial street names, or buildings, which are also widespread in the academic world, the history of knowledge is often more indirect. However, Van Rinsum succeeds in showing how the history of specific disciplines became intertwined with colonial domination. The exact sciences, in particular, benefited significantly from connections with the colonies, as natural scientists gained access to the tropical environment.

Thanks to expeditions, botanical gardens, and research stations in the tropics, natural sciences in Europe were able to advance while the colonized populations were excluded. Van Rinsum shows how essential tropical experience was for a career in natural science at Utrecht University. An example of this is research on cinchona cultivation. Professors G. J. Mulder and F. A. W. Miquel, a chemist and a physician respectively, advised the government on this matter, promoted their own students as employees, and conducted research on the economic yields on behalf of the

government. Mulder's students also took on various roles in the colonial business sector as technicians and chemists, leading Van Rinsum to conclude that Utrecht left its mark on colonial chemistry.

All these scientists relied on indigenous staff who received little recognition for their scientific contributions and were generally paid much less than their Dutch counterparts, but this aspect of colonial science is rarely addressed by Van Rinsum. Nevertheless, his analysis suggests that decolonizing the university cannot be limited to the humanities and social sciences.

Universiteit Utrecht en koloniale kennis [Utrecht university and colonial knowledge] is the first comprehensive historical study of the colonial history of a Dutch university, making it an important starting point for new research. Van Rinsum has meticulously gathered a large amount of material to rewrite the history of the University of Utrecht, focusing on the extent to which it is colonial. After several studies on the colonial history of provinces, cities, and banks, it is important that research is now emerging on the colonial history of knowledge and educational institutions. Society and academia are undergoing a collective process of coming to terms with the past, and this study is valuable in that regard.

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(translation by Henk van Rinsum)