

ACADEMIA | Letters

History and Presentism

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My book *Erasmus and the “Other”* (2019), was criticized as flawed by presentism.¹ my reply is given here: the past cannot totally be separated from the present, especially when dealing with intellectual history. Benedetto Croce’s conception that all history is contemporary history may sound crude to nuanced ears, yet it is not altogether wrong. To a certain degree at least, any study of the past is informed by the problems and needs or interests of the writer’s own time. Under the influence of Croce, E. H. Carr mocked both the presumption of objectivity and the almost religious conception of documents held by members of his profession. Carr did not dispute the need for historical accuracy, but he added: “I am reminded of Housman’s remark that ‘accuracy is a duty, not a virtue.’ To praise a historian for his accuracy is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned timber or properly mixed concrete in his building. It is a necessary condition of his work, but not his essential function.”² Carr elucidated an inescapable principle that philosophers such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger had argued for long before, namely, that the historian can see the past only through present glasses.³

The investigation of Erasmus’s attitudes toward the “Other” through the lens of Erasmus’s own set of values and through the observations and expectations of his contemporaries, is undoubtedly significant. Yet there is also another way of investigation, which can widen our perspective on Erasmus’s intellectual stances, namely, examining his engagements or disengagements on various issues through the lens of the modern terms. Employing modern terms in the analysis of early modern thought is of course no innovation of mine. The term “intellectual” (as a noun) did not exist before the Dreyfus affair in 1890’s France. Nevertheless, applying it to Erasmus and other earlier *personae* is common and acceptable.

¹Vartija, D., 2020. “Nathan Ron, Erasmus and the “Other”: On Turks, Jews, and Indigenous Peoples.” *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review*, 135 (2).

²E. H. Carr, *What is History* (London: Pelican, 1964), 15.

³*Ibid.*, 21.

The term “pacifism,” which is frequently used in relation to Erasmus, Anabaptists, and other Reformation figures, is another example.⁴ The term appeared in the French language (*pacifisme*) only in 1845, and for the first time in the English language (*pacifism*) in 1902. Using it in an early modern historical context may be considered anachronistic or an imposition of a modern outlook on patterns of thought that did not exist in 16th-century Europe.⁵ Nevertheless, the use of this term by scholars and writers dealing with Erasmus’s or the Anabaptist’s pursuit of peace is frequent and acceptable, due to the fact that the phenomenon is older than its name.

Such is Racism. The earliest pieces of evidence for its existence according to the ‘Oxford English Dictionary’ stem from 1880 and 1902.⁶ However, Racism as a historical phenomenon dates back to much earlier periods of history. In her important work *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (2018), historian Geraldine Heng convincingly argues against those historians of the Middle Ages and early modern Europe who ban the use of the term “race” and its derivatives. “Why call something race, when many old terms – ‘ethnocentrism,’ ‘xenophobia,’ ‘premodern discriminations,’ ‘prejudice,’ ‘chauvinism,’ even ‘fear of otherness and difference’ – have been used comfortably for so long to characterize the genocides, brutalizations, executions, and mass expulsions of the medieval period? Not to use the term race would be to sustain the reproduction of a certain kind of past, while keeping the door shut to tools, analyses, and resources that can name the past differently [...]”⁷ To reject use of “race,” Heng explains, is to destigmatize the impacts and consequences of laws, acts, practices, and institutions in the medieval period, leaving one unable to name them for what they are. Thus, the exclusion of the term “race” and its derivatives has facilitated the entrenchment and reproduction of a distinct type of historiography in and beyond the academy. I fully agree with Heng that historians have to grasp the ways in which *homo europaeus* emerges, *inter alia*, “through racial grids produced from the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, and the significance of that emergence for understanding the unstable entity we call ‘the West’ and its self-authorizing missions.”⁸ That is exactly what I have been researching: the racial aspects of Erasmus’s thought. Who was (and still is) considered a brighter prototype of the *homo europaeus* than him?

⁴Nathan Ron, “The Christian Peace of Erasmus,” *The European Legacy* 19 (2014), 27-42.

⁵Ronald G. Musto, “Just Wars and Evil Empire: Erasmus and the Turks,” in J. Monfasani and R. G. Musto (eds.), *Renaissance Society and Culture* (New York: Italica Press, 1991), 198.

⁶Wulf D. Hund, Stefanie Affeldt, “‘Racism’ Down Under. The Prehistory of a Concept in Australia,” *Australian Studies Journal* 33/34 (2019/2020): 9-30 (12).

⁷Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 23.

⁸Ibid. 24.

Furthermore, I accept Erika Rummel's definition of Erasmus's stance in favor of women's education as "progressive."⁹ Rummel writes that this idea was progressive by the standard of his time. I argue, it is deservedly defined progressive not only by the standard of his time but also by the standard of our time and our present norms; it was innovative and non-conventional in the 16th century, and it is also progressive in the context of our time. Sadly, there are still women in various societies and parts of the world who are thought of as unworthy of a literary education, or of any education at all. Another case in point is Erasmus's toleration of heretics, namely his objection – with a few exceptions – to their execution, which is highly appreciated by scholars and writers. Why so? Surely due to the fact that such an attitude was innovative and non-conventional in 16th-century Europe, but not less so because we judge this kind of tolerant attitude as progressive by our present norms and values. In other words, any normative evaluation or judgment of an ethical stance displayed by any historical protagonist cannot be detached from our modern and present point of views.

My book reviewer's final verdict is: "While a firm commitment to freedom of religion as a human right is certainly a value we should cherish and defend, few historians would agree that the most fruitful approach to the past is to parade past thinkers before a twenty-first-century tribunal." However, the reviewer would not admit two major points:

1. It is about racism no less than its about religion. Erasmus's exclusivist expressions identify the purified Christian state with the absence of Jews and Marranos from its territory. Thus, in France: "The law flourishes as nowhere else, nowhere has religion so retained its purity without being corrupted by commerce carried on by the Jews, as in Italy, or infected by the proximity of the Turks or Marranos, as in Hungary and Spain."¹⁰ Similarly: "Only France is not infected with heretics or Bohemian schismatics nor Jews or half Jews Marranos, and there are no Turks to be found in its vicinity."¹¹ The core of this desire was religious—Erasmus' fear of Judaic influence on Christianity. Nonetheless, such expressions, and others, have sharp racial anti-Semitic implications.
2. Although, ethnologically speaking, Erasmus does not openly present an orderly ethnological hierarchy, such an echelon can be reconstructed from his writings. A graded conception of the human race is embedded in his thought. Someone who sees in a certain group (European Christians) the pinnacle of God's creation; a second group (Turks/Muslims) he defines as half-Christians; a third group (converts from Judaism to Christianity) half-Christians; a fourth group (black Africans) he conceptualizes as

⁹Erika Rummel, *Erasmus on Women* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁰A *Complaint of Peace*: CWE 27, 306; ASD IV-2, 80

¹¹Erasmus's Letter (March 1517): CWE 4, 279; Ep 549: 11–13.

cursed humans whose black skin marks their moral inferiority and iniquity - is someone whose conception of humanity may be defined as hierarchical. Religiously, a hierarchical conception of faiths clearly existed in Medieval Europe. Accordingly, Christianity was the “best,” Islam was second to best, and Judaism was considered the “worst” of the three monotheistic religions.¹² Given the indicatory historical developments, particularly the enactment of the purity of blood laws in Spain and the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, the move from a religious-ethnological hierarchy, such as Erasmus’s, to a complete ethnological one, that took place in the 16th and 17th centuries, is unsurprising. A number of Jesuit missionaries, from Jose de Acosta (c. 1540-1600) in Peru to Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) in the East Indies, employed comparative ethnology, in which the natural inferiority of black people was sharply fixated, and developed a more hierarchical model of such an ethnology reasserting the superiority of Europeans over others.¹³ Hierarchies such as Erasmus’s were antecedents. Present researchers who are still stuck on the notion that Enlightenment thinkers are the sole source of hierarchical and racial conception of human kind should update their reading lists and reassess their dogmas.

¹²Irvn Resnick, “Conversion from the worst to the best: The relationship between medieval Judaism, Islam, and Christianity,” in Yaniv Fox and Yosi Yisraeli (eds.), *Contesting Inter-Religious Conversion in the Medieval World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 197-209.

¹³Joan Pau Rubiés, “Comparing Cultures in the Early Modern World: Hierarchies, Genealogies and the Idea of European Modernity,” in R. Gagné, S. Goldhill and G. E. R. Lloyd (eds.), *Regimes of Comparatism: Frameworks of Comparison in History, Religion and Anthropology* (Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2018), 116-176 (131); idem, “Were Early Modern Europeans Racist?” in Amos Morris-Reich and Dirk Rupnow (eds.), *Ideas of Race in the History of the Humanities* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 33-87 (particularly 36-37, 68).