

# Paradoxes of De-Canonization. New Forms of Cultural Transmission in History

NWO programme 'Cultural innovation and the fundamentals of the humanities'

Project leader

Prof.dr. Maria Grever (also see [Center for Historical Culture](#))

Research Team

[prof.dr. Maria Grever](#), chair Theory of History and Historiography

[prof.dr. Siep Stuurman](#), chair of European History

dr. Kees Ribbens, postdoc

## Summary

In an age of accelerating globalization, 'porous nations' and a profound transformation of collective identities and memories, the humanities have to rethink their traditional practice of cultural transmission. The traditional canon of the nation-state, a central element in the processes of trans-generational cultural transmission ever since the nineteenth-century expansion of national education, no longer commands unquestioned authority. In the humanities, new theories and new knowledge have eroded the canonized narratives.

Both in national history, including collective memory, and in the history of political thought a vast array of new sources and new interpretations has been produced, questioning the erstwhile monopoly of the male white voice. The revision of national history and the history of political thought along these lines has been one of the most productive and innovative currents in the humanities in the late twentieth century. It is therefore not an exaggeration to speak of a powerful trend of de-canonization. Paradoxically, however, the old canon is still being recycled over and over again in history textbooks and (visual) presentations for a general audience.

This project seeks to analyze processes of de-canonization in national historiography and memory, as well as in the history of political thought. It examines the paradox that, despite pertinent methodological and cultural critiques leveled at them over the past decades, the canons are still being recycled in history textbooks and public presentations. The underlying question is why and how specific narratives have become canonized, while others have not. The project will particularly investigate the potential role of a new, more open and multiform 'canon' in cultural transmission and education in the twenty-first century. It will focus on English and Dutch history, in a broader, European and global context insofar as necessary.

Institutional Setting

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (FHKW), Erasmus University Rotterdam  
Research School: Huizinga Institute

### **Duration of the project**

January 2004 until May 2006. WRR-funded extension of the project till December 2006.

### **National and International Collaboration**

This research is carried out in close collaboration with several institutions, research institutes and individual scholars in the Netherlands and abroad. Full support is received from EUROCLIO, the European Standing Conference of History Teachers' Association.

The researchers are closely working together with dr. Terry Haydn, Senior Lecturer in Education, University of East Anglia (UK) and with prof. dr. Nicole Tutiaux-Guillon, IUFM de Lille and Université de Lille 3 (France). Exchange takes place with the Center for the Study of Historical Consciousness, UBC, Vancouver, Canada; the Friedrich Schiller Universität, Jena, Germany; and the Universität Mannheim, Germany.

Within the framework of the NWO programme 'Cultural innovation and the fundamentals of the humanities' the Rotterdam research team acts in close conjunction with the project 'Re-vitalizing the humanities' of dr. Ed Jonker and dr. Hendrik Henrichs, associate professors at the Research Institute for History and Culture (OGC), Utrecht University.

### **Expert group**

The research team is supported by a group of Dutch experts: teachers, philosophers of history, historians, specialists in didactics and museum experts:

- prof.dr. Ton Bevers (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
- drs. Stefan Boom (CITO Testing and Assessment, Arnhem)
- dr. Carla van Boxtel (University of Amsterdam)
- dr. Jannet van Drie (University of Amsterdam)
- Maas van Egdome (Ashram College, Alphen aan den Rijn)
- dr. Dienke Hondius (Free University Amsterdam)
- drs. Cock van Horzen (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
- dr. Harry Jansen (Radboud University Nijmegen)
- dr. Stefan Klein (ICLON, Leiden University)
- Joke van der Leeuw-Roord (EUROCLIO, The Hague)
- dr. Nico Lettinck (Windesheim University of Professional Education, Zwolle)
- Tijs van Ruiten (National Education Museum, Rotterdam)
- drs. Elise Storck (ICLON, Leiden University)

- drs. Jan de Vries (Radboud University Nijmegen)
- drs. Arie Wilschut (IVGD Amsterdam).

## Research Project

### National Identity in Context. A Common Past in the Netherlands?

On request of the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR: Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid), Maria Grever and Kees Ribbens are currently working on the research project National identity in context. A common past in the Netherlands? The WRR, an independent council, advises the Dutch government on a variety of themes, usually with a long term perspective.

This research project is related to our NWO-project Paradoxes of De-Canonisation and deals more specifically with the making and unmaking of social identities amongst young adults in a multicultural setting. In recent years a strong emphasis is being placed on the nation state, a phenomenon that can be observed throughout the western world. Globalisation, migration as well as European unification influenced Dutch society and have caused uncertainty about national culture and identity. Since the formation of identities is basically a historically oriented process, the transmission of historical knowledge - whether or not arranged in a canon - is considered to be an important tool for strengthening the cohesion of the population and for integrating immigrants. Yet, up till now, little attention has been paid to the fact that the historical culture has profoundly changed over the last decades. The increasing diversity of the population in the western nation-states and the emergence of the new media profoundly affect the way people acknowledge, appropriate and re-appropriate the past and how they see their future. Which social frames are salient in the dynamic process of identity formation? How inclusive can a national memory framework actually be?

The intended research will increase our understanding of the interaction between social identity and historical culture amongst young adults at the beginning of the 21st century. The study will explore the analytical value of the concept 'national identity' and its historical backgrounds. Furthermore, based upon survey research among secondary school pupils in England, France and the Netherlands, we will investigate to what extent the diverse cultural backgrounds and memory cultures of young adults connect or disconnect to history education. The main goal of this comparative research is to establish the role of national identity within the dynamic process of identity formation among youngsters in a multicultural society.

[Maria Grever](#) (project leader)  
Kees Ribbens (postdoc researcher)

Paradoxes of De-Canonization. New Forms of Cultural Transmission in History

## Upcoming Events

- On Wednesday 13 September 2006 a paper by Maria Grever, Terry Haydn (University of East Anglia), and Kees Ribbens, titled 'Identity and School History: the Perspective of Young People from the Netherlands and England' is presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, Geneva 2006.
- In October 2006, Maria Grever has been invited to give a guest lecture on the historical canon at the [Free University Brussels](#) and the Erasmushogeschool Brussels, [brochure](#)
- November 10 2006, 1.00 p.m. Utrecht, Symposium 'With or without a canon?' organized by Maria Grever, Kees Ribbens and Ed Jonker. Lectures and debate with historians (professors, teachers, didactic specialists), museum and heritage experts, about the recent report of the official Dutch canon committee, the so-called Van Oostrom committee (to be published on October 16). At the end of the symposium the book *Controverses rond de canon* (Assen 2006) will be presented. See also [programme](#).
- April 2007, intended month of book publication National Identity in context. A common past in the Netherlands? written by Maria Grever and Kees Ribbens on request of the [Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy \(WRR\)](#).

## Past Events

- In June 2006, Siep Stuurman will teach a four-week class on 'the making of modern equality in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment Europe' at the [University of Xiamen](#) (China).
- May 31, Maria Grever has been invited to deliver a lecture on 'Historical consciousness and national identity. The boundaries of a canonised past in modern society', at the History Department, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (Germany).
- 19-20 May 2006, international conference 'Technologies of Memory in the Arts', Nijmegen. In a session devoted to 'Personal Memories in Digital Environments', Kees Ribbens presented a paper 'Historical canon versus the plural histories of internet?' He also chaired one of the Parallel Sessions.
- 12 May 2006, meeting of the NWO Expert Group Paradoxes of De-Canonisation. Speakers are dr. Jannet van Drie on her dissertation Learning about the past with new technologies (Utrecht 2005) and dr. Hilda Amsing on her dissertation on Dutch history education Bakens verzetten in het voortgezet onderwijs, 1863-1920 (Groningen 2002).
- 25 March 2006, [European Social Science History Conference \(ESSHC\)](#), Amsterdam. In the session on 'Relationship with the Past among Youngsters', Kees Ribbens will present a paper on 'A historical canon for whom?'. Other participants in the session are Lies Klerkx, Keith Barton, Alan W. McCully and chair Ed Jonker.
- 21 March 2006, Maria Grever will give a lecture on 'Clashes between memory cultures and the erosion of the nation-state' at the [Erasmus Academy](#), Rotterdam (Higher Education for Senior Citizens).

- 17 March 2006, Colloquium on Historiography and Theory, Utrecht University. Siep Stuurman will give a lecture on 'Herodotus and Sima Qian. History, Ethnography and Common Humanity in Ancient Greece and Han China'. ([abstract](#))
- 8 February 2006, Conference for Flemish history teachers 'Beyond school history', [Catholic University Leuven](#), Belgium. Kees Ribbens will give a lecture 'Historical interest among youngsters of various backgrounds in the Netherlands'.
- Panel 'Gender, Collective Memory, and (De-)Canonization', **20th International Congress of Historical Sciences**, 3-9 July 2005 Sydney, Australia. Chair prof.dr. Mary O'Dowd (UK). Papers: prof.dr. M. Grever (EUR, The Netherlands), prof. dr. Susanne Maurer (Germany), dr. Karen Offen (USA), prof. dr. Sylvia Schraut (Germany) and dr. Kees Ribbens (EUR, The Netherlands).
- [International conference 'Beyond the Canon. History in the Twenty-First Century'](#), 16-17 June 2005, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Organized with support from NWO, KNAW, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication of the Erasmus University Rotterdam and Vereniging Trustfonds Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam.
- 4 April 2005 Conference History Didactics for all Dutch postgraduate teacher training students, organized by IVLOS, Utrecht University. Maria Grever will give a lecture 'The historical canon: to be or not to be' ('De historische canon: to be or not to be')
- 8 March 2005: debate History in many colours Debate in 'De Unie', Rotterdam entitled History in many colours ('Geschiedenis in vele kleuren') with Ibrahim Spalburg, prof. Paul van der Laar, and Kees Ribbens.
- 14-15 February 2005: Conference History in British Education Kees Ribbens will attend the national conference 'History in British Education' at the Institute of Historical Research, London.
- Gendering Memory, January 2005  
Maria Grever and Kees Ribbens will attend the international workshop on 'Gendering Memory' at the University of Mannheim, Germany, 20-21 January 2005. Maria Grever will present a paper here on 'The new historical culture and the re-vitalisation of the national canon'.  
[Abstract of the paper](#)
- 11 January 2005: debate The Historical Canon  
Debate in 'De Unie', Rotterdam entitled The historical canon. More profound or more superficial? ('De historische canon: versoaping of verdieping?') with prof. Hans Blom, prof. Willem Frijhoff, Hans Verhage and Maria Grever.
- Lecture by Maria Grever, 'What should we do with the canon?' ('Wat moeten we met de canon?'), Symposium on the occasion of the presentation of the new Dutch handbook on history didactics, 10 December 2004, [Netherlands Institute for Didactics of History](#) at the Amsterdam Faculty of Education/University of Amsterdam.
- George L. Mosse Prize for prof. Stuurman  
Siep Stuurman has been awarded the George L. Mosse Prize by the American Historical Association for his book 'François Poulain de la Barre

and the Invention of Modern Equality' (Harvard University Press 2004). The Mosse Prize is awarded annually for an outstanding major work of extraordinary scholarly distinction, creativity, and originality in the intellectual and cultural history of Europe since the Renaissance. It was established in 2000 by former students, colleagues, and friends of Professor Mosse, eminent scholar of European history. > [More information](#)

## International Conference

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University  
Rotterdam

in collaboration with Utrecht University (OGC),  
Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)  
and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW)

**BEYOND THE CANON -HISTORY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

at the Municipal Archives Rotterdam

16-17 June 2005

### Outline of conference theme

Although it would be exaggerated to proclaim the end of the nation in the near future, it cannot be denied that nations have become porous and contested. Consequentially, the practices of cultural transmission and education based upon them have likewise become precarious. After a half-century of decolonization, migration and postcoloniality, feminism and the gendering of historical discourse, the received canon of national history and political thought no longer commands the 'natural authority' it once possessed.

Even so, we have to confront the paradox that, despite the vast amount of criticism leveled at it, the canon is still being recycled over and over again in textbooks and publications aimed at a broader public. Educators and public moralists frequently recommend the canon as the only alternative to the postmodernist maze of relativism and contingency.

The conference sets out to discuss various dimensions of this paradox of de-canonization, such as gender, postcoloniality and migration, equality and the Enlightenment, situating them in the shifting balance of national, European and World History. It will investigate the feasibility of revised, multiform and more open 'canons', and the role they might play in cultural transmission in the twenty-first century.

The Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands, is proud to host this international two-day conference and is looking forward to a stimulating exchange of views and experiences in a field the importance of which will be recognized both inside and outside the academic world.



## Programme

### [Full conference programme](#)

### Related Publications

- Maria Grever, 'Nationale identiteit en Historisch besef. De risico's van een canon in de postmoderne samenleving', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 119 (2006) nr.2
- Kees Ribbens, 'Het schijnbare houvast van een nationale historische canon. Geschiedenis en identiteit in de multiculturele samenleving', *Kleio* 47 (juni 2006)
- Siep Stuurman, 'Laatste saluut aan de canon; Wat iedereen écht moet weten in de globaliserende wereld van vandaag', *NRC Handelsblad* 17 maart 2006
- Maria Grever, 'Die neue Geschichtskultur und die Rückkehr des nationalen Kanons', in: R. Johanna Regnath/Mascha Riepl-Schmidt/Ute Scherb (Hg.), *Eroberung der Geschichte. Frauen und Tradition* (LIT Verlag: Münster u.a. 2006)
- Kees Ribbens, 'Canon vereist heroverweging', *Geschiedenis Magazine* (formerly: Spiegel Historiae) 41 (2006) nr.1, 43-45.
- [Maria Grever 'Re-appropriation and the Re-Shaping of Canonized Collective Memories' \(Convenor's overview, Panel 'Gender, Collective Memory, and \(De-\)Canonization', 20th International Congress of Historical Sciences, July 2005 Sydney, Australia\)](#)
- [Kees Ribbens, 'Framing and Communicating the Past\(s\)'. \(Discussant's report, Panel 'Gender, Collective Memory, and \(De-\)Canonization', 20th International Congress of Historical Sciences, July 2005 Sydney, Australia\)](#)
- Maria Grever, 'Wat doen we met de canon?', in: Arie Wilschut red., *Zinvol, leerbaar, haalbaar. Over geschiedenisonderwijs en de rol van de canon daarin* (Amsterdam, Vossiuspers UvA 2005), 21-30.
- [Siep Stuurman, 'Een wereldhistorisch perspectief', \*Kleio\* 46 \(2005\) nr.4, 36-40.](#)
- [Maria Grever, 'De paradox van de nationale canon', \*Erasmus Magazine\*, 10 maart 2005.](#)
- [Maria Grever en Kees Ribbens, 'Canon vraagt om evenwicht', de \*Volkskrant\*, 1 maart 2005.](#)

- [Kees Ribbens, 'Geschiedenis stopt niet bij de landsgrens' in diverse GPD-dagbladen, februari 2005.](#)
- Kees Ribbens, 'De grootste Nederlander M/V?', *Historica* 28 (2005) nr.2, 21-23.
- Kees Ribbens, 'Welk verleden weegt het zwaarst?', *Holland* 37 (2005) 1, 55-58.
- [Kees Ribbens, 'De vaderlandse canon voorbij? Een multiculturele historische cultuur in wording', \*Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis\* 117 \(2004\) 500-521.](#)
- [Maria Grever en Kees Ribbens, 'De historische canon onder de loep', \*Kleio\* 45 \(2004\) nr. 7, 2-7.](#)
- S. Stuurman, 'How and why to write a History of Equality', Leidschrift.
- S. Stuurman, 'Religie is een verleden waarvan men steeds afscheid neemt, maar dat niet echt voorbij wil gaan' NRC-Handelsblad 20 november 2004.
- S. Stuurman, 'Turkije moet een faire kans krijgen', NRC-Handelsblad 13 september 2004.
- Maria Grever, 'Het verhaal achter veel jaartallen is verdamp't', *NRC Handelsblad*, 5 juni 2004.
- [Maria Grever, 'Visualisering en collectieve herinneringen. "Volendams meisje" als icoon van de nationale identiteit', \*Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis\* 117 \(2004\) 207-229.](#)
- Maria Grever, 'Nostalgisch beeld van ons verleden voldoet niet meer', *De Gelderlander* 24 March 2004.
- S. Stuurman, 'Citizenship and Cultural Difference in France and the Netherlands' in Richard Bellamy, Dario Castiglione and Emilio Santoro, eds., *Lineages of European Citizenship: Rights, Belonging and Participation in Eleven Nation-States* (Basingstoke & New York, 2004), 167-185.
- S. Stuurman, 'The Voice of Thersites: Reflections on the Origins of the Idea of Equality' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65 (2004) 171-189.
- S. Stuurman, *François Poulain de la Barre and the Invention of Modern Equality* (Cambridge Mass. & London, 2004).
- Siep Stuurman, 'Liberal Political Theory and the Contingencies of History: Review essay on Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics*', *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 42 (2003), 94-105.
- [Maria Grever, 'Beyond petrified history. Gender and collective memories', \*Museumsblatt. Mitteilungen aus dem Museumswesen Baden-Württembergs\* 34 \(April 2003\) 5-7.](#)
- Kees Ribbens, *Een eigentijds verleden. Alledaagse historische cultuur in Nederland, 1945-2000* (Hilversum 2002).
- Siep Stuurman, 'The canon of the history of political thought: its critique and a proposed alternative', *History and Theory* 39 (2000) 147-166.
- Maria Grever, 'Opvattingen en misvattingen over het geschiedenisonderwijs', in: P. den Boer en G.W. Muller (red.), *Geschiedenis op school. Zes voordrachten over het geschiedenisonderwijs* (Amsterdam KNAW 1998) 27-48.
- Maria Grever, 'Controlling memories. Gender and the construction of scientific history', in: *Annali dell'Instituto storico italo-germanico in Trento Parte II 'Problemi storiografici'* (1997), 385-400.



- Maria Grever, 'The pantheon of feminist culture. Women's movements and the organization of memory', *Gender and History* 9 (1997) 2, 364-374.
- Maria Grever, 'Die relative Geschichtslosigkeit der Frauen. Geschlecht und Geschichtswissenschaft', in: W. Küttler, J. Rüsen und E. Schulz (Hg.), *Geschichtsdiskurs 4: Krisenbewusstsein, Katastrophenerfahrungen und Innovationen 1880-1945* (Bielefeld 1997) 108-123.

## Links

### International

- [Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness](#), British Columbia, Canada
- [Euroclio](#), the European Standing Conference of History Teachers' Associations
- [International Society for History Didactics](#)

### The Netherlands

- [CITO](#) Testing and Assessment
- [Developments and proposals for history education in the Netherlands](#): SLO vakdossier geschiedenis 2003
- [Dutch Canon Committee](#)
- [IVGD](#) - Netherlands Institute for Didactics of History
- [National Museum of Education](#), Rotterdam
- [Vereniging van docenten in Geschiedenis en Staatsinrichting in Nederland](#) - Dutch History Teachers Association (VGN)

### England / United Kingdom

- [History in English schools at a glance](#) - Ofsted report 2002/2003
- [History in secondary schools](#) (UK) - Ofsted report 2002/2003
- [History teaching in Higher Education](#)
- [National Curriculum](#) (England): History
- [Teaching History](#), professional journal for history teachers (published by the Historical Association)

Paradoxes of De-Canonization. New Forms of Cultural Transmission in History

## Upcoming Events

### HERODOTUS AND SIMA QIAN

History, Ethnography and Common Humanity in Ancient Greece and Han China

History as a reasoned narrative account of the past was invented in Ancient China and in the civilizations around the eastern Mediterranean. It received its two best-

known canonical formulations in the former Han dynasty in China and in the Greek communities on the western rim of Asia. Herodotus' Histories recount the history of the Greco-Persian Wars in the early decades of the fifth century BCE, against the backdrop of a history and ethnography of the world of Western Asia and Egypt. The rise and defeat of Persian imperialism and the maintenance of Greek independence are the main themes of his history. In the Shiji ("Records of the Grand Historian"), Sima Qian (Ssu-ma Ch'ien) presents a history of China from its mythical beginnings to the Han empire of his own lifetime, the late second and early first century BCE, including large swathes of the history and ethnography of the lands to the west and north of China. The emergence of a unified empire out of the Warring States of pre-Qin China and the relations between the Empire and the surrounding peoples are the major themes of his history.

For reasons that will become apparent in the course of this essay, I will focus my comparison of the Histories and the Shiji on the themes of empire, common humanity, cultural difference and temporality. In particular, I will foreground the dialectic of ethnography and history, and the salience of frontiers, that frames these histories. It is in the context of empire and cultural difference that Herodotus seeks to find out what it means to be Greek and Sima Qian what it means to be Chinese. The writing of history is always an exercise in self-definition, and, more than anything else, it is the confrontation with others that compels people to question their own identity. That is what makes imperialism so central to my comparison, whether empire is a menacing force from without, as in Herodotus, or a perilous course the fate of one's own civilization depends on, as in Sima Qian. Transposed in the terms of our late modern times, fifth-century Greece and Han China were involved in processes of globalization that were unprecedented, dangerous, and unpredictable. It is therefore only natural that both Herodotus and Sima Qian were so fascinated with the conditions and morality of empires, as it is equally natural that they gave so much thought to cultural difference, and tried out formulations of what we today call cultural relativism. Finally, it explains why both historians set out (and to a large extent succeeded) to write a history of "the known world". Their societies had reached a stage in their development when it was no longer possible to understand one's own civilization without taking the measure of its "global" environment. This, then, is the problematic that will guide my comparative investigation.

In the concluding section, I will examine in what ways Herodotus and Sima Qian differ from the Enlightenment conception(s) of history, empire and common humanity.