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Introduction. Imagining the other: on xenophobia and xenophilia in early modern Europe

Harald Hendrix

This issue of *Leidschrift* explores some of the attitudes early modern Europeans developed in their confrontation with people they considered different and thus as the ‘other’. Those could be persons professing beliefs other than one’s own, or belonging to political entities that were perceived as foreign or even hostile. But this ‘otherness’ might just as well be determined along the lines of status, colour, gender, or simply habits, clothing and behaviour. Furthermore it could develop into a large range of attitudes, from negative to positive, from xenophobia to xenophilia. As of the fifteenth century, such positioning vis-à-vis these others gained ever more urgency as a consequence of the rapidly increasing dynamism of European societies, which conditioned a remarkable increase in mobility and cultural differentiation. Early modern Europeans had to deal with an overwhelming amount of radically new developments opening up their horizon, from the great geographical explorations to the divide in Western Christendom, from the advance of the Ottoman Empire to the explosion of global trade opportunities. Within such turbulence a redefinition of one’s own position was called for, and not only in the religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants. If anything, the Reformation indeed had demonstrated that there was no such thing anymore as one dominant discourse – be it in a strictly religious or more comprehensively cultural sense. And it was precisely in this breaking up of what up till then was a predominantly monolithic culture that originates the identity search which in this period forcefully entailed reflections on otherness.

The intrinsic connection between alterity and identity underlying such reflections was well understood by some of the brightest spirits of the age, notably Michel de Montaigne whose essay on ‘Cannibals’ sharply pointed out that identity is not an absolute, let alone natural or neutral, but a relative concept grounded in cultural dispositions and choices.¹ But we find such insights also in some of the more attentive contemporary reporters on

¹ Written in the mid 1570s, Montaigne published his ‘Des Cannibales’ as chapter 30 (later 31) in the first edition of his *Essais* (Bordeaux 1580); cf. the modern edition in: Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* I, E. Naya, D. Reguig and A. Tarrête eds. (Paris 2009) 392-410.

foreign lands, as in the detailed description of the Low Countries given by the Italian merchant Lodovico Guicciardini, who in the 1560s went to great pains in order to understand the peculiarities of the people he observed from his Antwerp base. Not by gazing at their distinctiveness – though particularly the independent behaviour of the local women kept amazing him (fig. 1) – but by learning how a balance of ‘Italian’ and ‘Flemish-Dutch’ manners might produce something of an ideal mix of identities able to produce commercial success for his countrymen, which after all was what he was looking for.²



Figs. 1-3, left to right: ‘Hollandica seu Batavica foemina’ (Dutch woman) from Jost Amman, *Gynaeceum, sive theatrum mulierum* (Frankfurt am Main 1586); ‘Turca di mediocre conditione’ (Turkish middle class woman) and ‘Servo turco’ (Turkish male slave), both from Cesare Vecellio, *De gli habiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del mondo libri due* (Venice 1590).

² Living in Antwerp as of 1542, Lodovico Guicciardini first published his *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi* in 1567 with Guglielmus Silvius in Antwerp, presenting an updated and enlarged version of his description with Plantin in 1581. The book immediately was hugely successful and influential in establishing for an international audience an image of the Low Countries; it was translated into French (1567), German (1580), English (1591), Dutch (1612) and Latin (1613).

Such enquiries are informed by an interest in otherness that reveals a proto-anthropological curiosity, a disposition that would even engender large-scale enterprises aimed at documenting human diversity, from the works on people's costumes all over the globe by Jean-Jacques Boissard (1581) and Cesare Vecellio (1590) (figs. 2-3) to Bernard Picart and Jean-Frédéric Bernard's monumental *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, published between 1723 and 1743 (fig. 4).³



Fig. 4: 'Cérémonies nuptiale et funèbre du Japon', from Bernard Picart, Jean-Frédéric Bernard, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (Amsterdam 1723-1743).

³ See on these ambitious enterprises: M.F. Rosenthal and A.R. Jones, *The Clothing of the Renaissance World: Europe, Asia, Africa, The Americas*. Cesare Vecellio's "Habiti Antichi et Moderni" (London 2008); L. Hunt, M.C. Jacob and W. Mijnhardt, *The Book That Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's "Religious Ceremonies of the World"* (Cambridge 2010).

It was, however, mainly in its fixation on difference that this thinking about alterity and identity came to the fore. Also here we can witness a range that goes from extremely positive to outright hostile attitudes. Difference, in fact, can motivate curiosity as well as envy, admiration and rejection. On the one hand, for instance, the French royal court all through the sixteenth century pursued an active policy to attract Italian artists and courtiers, valued as they were for their creative and administrative qualities, which were considered a characteristic product of the Renaissance courts as they had developed in the Italian peninsula shortly before. On the other hand, though, these very persons were distrusted and viewed with envy, attributing them even sinister political interventions like the massacre of the Protestant elite during the St. Bartholomew's night in 1572, on the basis of more or less the same qualities, but now interpreted in a vehemently unfriendly vein. While thus at some point the 'Italian' art of government as developed by theoreticians like the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli was valued highly, on other occasions it could become an element of strong disapproval and even persecution.⁴

As this case illustrates, the balance between positive and negative assessments of otherness not only was quite delicate and fragile, but tended to get monopolized by hostility towards what was perceived as foreign. Such feelings could easily prevail in circumstances of disorder and/or conflict, as was the case in France in the 1570s, where religious divides within the country's elites had produced a political standstill that threatened to paralyze society. In such circumstances, xenophobia easily prevailed over xenophilia, and in doing so adopted argumentations that were totally opposed to what intellectuals like Montaigne had taught only shortly before. His relativist philosophizing on the cultural constructedness of identity and alterity was then superseded by an essentialist discourse that viewed identities – one's own and of one's others' – as real and fixed, and moreover as predominantly determined by situations like one's geographical origins. Hence the Italians active at the French court of the late sixteenth century, including the Florence-born queen-mother Catherine de' Medici, became viewed with suspicion. Not anymore because they had qualities in government the French still lacked, but because they were believed to be shrewd and treacherous by their very nature as Italians and 'Machiavellian' Florentines, and therefore a danger to be countered.

⁴The episode still attracts considerable historiographical debate, in what is altogether an overwhelming bibliography. For a recent overview see: J. Arlette, *La Saint-Barthélemy. Les mystères d'un crime d'état, 24 août 1572* (Paris 2007).

Such labelling of people on the basis of their geographical origin indeed became one of the most distinguishing characteristics of early modern attitudes towards otherness.⁵ It developed into an intricate system that had all the apparent qualities of a science, thus gaining considerable authority. Helpful here certainly was the fact that it could rely on most ancient and hence commanding theories describing and explaining the variety in human kind, the so-called humoral theory of temperaments that dominated medical thought well into the eighteenth century, and the climate classification theory that likewise proposed a determinist view on human character. Based on the authority of classical masters like Hippocrates and Aristoteles, these theories offered a schematic and thus highly compelling interpretation of human nature, being determined by a mix of its bodily fluids – the four humors of the temperament theory – or by its geographical position on a scale of warm and cold climates.⁶ Projected into an enquiry on identity and alterity, this line of thinking then produced elaborate schematic representations of the qualities considered characteristic and natural for all humans, viewed within the constituent categories of national and/or regional belonging.

One of its best known specimens, the Steiermark (Styria) ‘Völkertafel’ dating to the early eighteenth century (fig. 5), well illustrates that this stereotypical manner of imagining others enjoyed popularity in large segments of society, since many versions of this particular artefact are known, all anonymous and undated.⁷ But it also eloquently shows that this process of labelling was clearly intended to forge a positive identity of one’s own, by attributing to others all but negative characteristics. Germans here are ‘offenherzig, ganz gut, gewitzt, immer dabei, rechtswesen, unüberwinlich, sehr treu’ etc., while all others, from the Spanish to the Swedes, from the English to the Turks, are on the whole much less flattened and even utterly blamed for being ‘hochmütig, lichtsinnig, hinterhältich, bäuerlich, untreu, boshaft’. This is fully in line with the

⁵ Cf. the essays collected in H. Hendrix and T. Hoenselaars eds., *Vreemd volk. Beeldvorming over buitenlanders in de vroegmoderne tijd* (Amsterdam 1998).

⁶ On early modern climate theory see: W. Zacharasiewicz, *Die Klimatheorie in der englischen Literatur und Literaturkritik von der Mitte des 16. bis zum frühen 18. Jahrhundert* (Vienna 1977).

⁷ On the eighteenth-century Völkertafel, and the Steiermark one in particular see: F.K. Stanzel, *Europäischer Völkerspiegel. Imagologisch-ethnographische Studien zu den Völkertafeln des frühen 18. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg 1999).

mentalities springing from the ancient theories on temperaments and climates, all aimed at finding a right balance of often contrasting features, but then projecting this balanced result of moderation onto the perspective of whoever was interested. Or to quote Montaigne's words:

(...) chacun appelle barbarie, ce qui n'est pas de son usage. Comme de vrai il semble, que nous n'avons autre mire de la vérité, et de la raison, que l'exemple et idée des opinions et usances du pays où nous sommes. Là est toujours la parfaite religion, la parfaite police, parfait et accompli usage de toutes choses.⁸



Fig. 5: 'Kurze Beschreibung der in Europa befintlichen Völkern und Ihren Aigenschaften' (Styria c. 1725) Vienna, Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde.

Stereotypical thinking on others as it developed in early modern Europe hence was usually dictated by the perspective of whoever employed it, surely not by empirical observations or by a sincere interest in the others

⁸ Montaigne, *Essays*, 396.

concerned. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find opposing parties using exactly the same stereotypical negative labels to damage their opponents. After John Foxe's accusing Catholics of being naturally inclined to cruelty, in the systematic martyrology of his 1563 *Actes and Monuments* (fig. 6), Catholics came to their defense and accused Protestants of exactly the same inclinations, as in Richard Verstegen's 1587 *Theatrum crudelitatum haereticorum*.⁹ However, in its ambition to systematically describe and order all known human kind, this stereotypical labelling of others is part and parcel of a much more comprehensive movement to dominate and control reality, an endeavour that permeated many sectors of early modern society and motivated a variety of important innovations, from the advent of absolute monarchy to the invention of the Wunderkammer and then the museum.



Fig. 6: 'A most exact Table of the first ten Persecutions of the Primitive Church under the Heathen Tyrants of Rome', from John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (London 1563).

⁹ Competing martyrologies are examined in: F. Lestringant, *Lumière des martyrs. Essai sur le martyre au siècle des Réformes* (Paris 2004) and S.B. Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge 2005). On Verstegen see: P. Arblaster, *Antwerp & the World. Richard Verstegen and the International Catholic Reformation* (Leuven 2004).



Fig. 7: Conquistadores investigating indigenous men and women, from Sebastian Münster, *La Cosmographie universelle contenant la situation de toutes les parties du monde, avec les propriétés & appartenances* (Basel 1552).

This general urge to do things systematically may also help to explain why in this period the effects of putting negative labels on people considered other became all the more invasive and violent. Repressive policies were not only deployed in dealing with the original populace encountered in the newly explored parts of the world (fig. 7), causing even indignation amongst own ranks, as Bartolomé de las Casas' 1542 *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* well illustrates, where the Spanish Dominican friar accuses his countrymen conquistadores of atrocities and inhuman behaviour.¹⁰

¹⁰ De las Casas' report on Spanish atrocities in the colonies was highly instrumental in forging the so-called 'Black Legend', a coherent and remarkably influential complex of negative stereotypes regarding the early modern Spanish monarchy and Spain in general. On this myth see: J. Pérez, *La leyenda negra* (Madrid 2009). On its role in framing the Dutch-Spanish conflict see: Y. Rodríguez Pérez, *The Dutch Revolt through Spanish Eyes: Self and Other in Historical and Literary Texts of Golden Age Spain (c. 1548-1673)* (Bern 2008). For an assessment of De las Casas see the essays collected in: J. Friede and B. Keen eds., *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Toward an Understanding of the Man and his Work* (Dekalb 1971).

Repression was also used, but now in a much more systematic manner, in confronting those people within their own communities that for long had been labelled as different, from Jews to witches, from homosexuals to vagabonds. Never before, nor in most cases afterwards, had these groups witnessed persecution and punishment as in the early modern era, well into the eighteenth century.¹¹

What made groups like these into others was not their foreignness but their difference with respect to habits, religion and behaviour, all measured against a set of norms adopted by the dominant groups as being 'normal' or 'just'. This normative thinking, however, was still very much in development, being debated in fierce polemics and in a large range of publications aimed at defining what were to be considered standards for human behaviour, from Baldassar Castiglione's *Cortegiano* (1528) to Baltasar Gracián's *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* (1648).¹² While such precarity in normative thinking easily could foster policies directed at disciplining others, it could also engender a desire to fix one's own identity according to self-invented standards, a phenomenon we can witness with particular force in the image-policies adopted by some of the most influential early modern monarchs, from the 'Virgin Queen' Elisabeth I to Louis XIV, 'le roi soleil'.¹³

Whereas the character-forging of monarchs like these was clearly motivated by political constraints, in cultural representations, and notably in theatre, such clear-cut characterization had an artistic background.

¹¹ This field has for long attracted a large range of historical scholarship, notably regarding early modern witch hunts, including: H.R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays* (New York 1969); B.P. Levack, *The Witch Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York 1995); R.W. Thurston, *Witch, Wicce, Mother Goose: The Rise and Fall of the Witch Hunts in Europe and North America* (Harlow 2001). Particularly influential in this field are some of the books by C. Ginzburg: *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Baltimore 1983), as well as his *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (Chicago 2004).

¹² On Castiglione's *Cortegiano* and its reception see: A. Quondam, 'Questo povero cortegiano'. *Castiglione, il libro, la storia* (Rome 2000), as well as P. Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier. The European Reception of Castiglione's Cortegiano* (London 1995). On Gracián see now the book-length introduction by Marc Fumaroli, in the edition of his text in its 1684 French translation by Nicolas Amelot de la Houssaye: B. Gracián, *L'Homme de cour* (Paris 2011) 7-246.

¹³ Cf. P. Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven and London 1992); S. Doran and T. Freeman eds., *The Myth of Elizabeth* (Basingstoke 2003).

Informed by theories on the effects of dramatic performances, playwrights were ever more interested in designing a large variety of human types with clearly distinguishable and preferably oppositional traits, based on their status, their looks and on their behaviours. In this endeavour, they could easily fall back on the repertoire of stereotypical characterization that contemporary theories on human character had been elaborating. The many Italian characters in Elizabethan theatre are a result of such artistic policies, as well as a figure like black Othello, or the Danish Hamlet.¹⁴ And in a comedy like Bredero's 1617 *Spaanschen Brabander*, written for the Amsterdam stage, the stereotypical characterization of the protagonist – coming from outside (Brabant) and behaving not as the Dutch would do, but as a Spaniard – depends largely on such templates.¹⁵

This then explains why early modern theatre is such a rich source for our present-day understanding of the stereotypical thinking about identity and alterity as it was established from the sixteenth up to the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Hence in the systematic exploration of this phenomenon, pioneering work has been done by scholars working in this particular field, notably anglicists specialising in early modern English theatre. While concentrating on the images of otherness present in literary texts and tracing back their origins in theories on climate and on character, anglicists like the Austrians Waldemar Zacharasiewicz and Franz Stanzel have laid the foundations for a scholarly approach coined 'imagology',¹⁷ that in more recent years, through the efforts of scholars as Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen, would further evolve into an instrument for understanding some

¹⁴ On this, see for instance T. Hoenselaars, *Images of Englishmen and Foreigners in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries: A Study of Stage Characters and National Character in English Renaissance Drama, 1558-1642* (Rutherford 1992).

¹⁵ Cf. M. Meijer Drees, *Andere landen, andere mensen. De beeldvorming van Holland versus Spanje en Engeland omstreeks 1650* (The Hague 1997) 87-93, as well as R. van Stipriaan, 'Hollandse botheid in de Spaanschen Brabander' in: W. Abrahamse et al. eds., *Kort tijt-verdrijf. Opstellen over Nederlands toneel (vanaf ca. 1550) aangeboden aan Mieke Smits-Veldt* (Amsterdam 1996) 95-102.

¹⁶ The relevance of stereotypical notions of character in early modern literature in general is explored in L. van Delft, *Littérature et anthropologie. Nature humaine et caractère à l'âge classique* (Paris 1993).

¹⁷ W. Zacharasiewicz, *Imagology Revisited* (Amsterdam 2010); F.K. Stanzel: *Europäer. Ein imagologischer Essay* (Heidelberg 1997) as well as the titles mentioned above, cf. notes 6 and 7.

of the fundamental templates underlying the culture of romantic nationalism as it developed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁸

The present collection of essays assesses a large range of stereotypical thinking in early modern Europe, from the late Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century, from Moldavia to the Dutch West Indies. In doing so, it explores how tenacious such clichés are, but also unravels some moments where they get exposed and undermined. Following some of the basic assumptions in the field of imagology, the authors investigate such commonplaces as products of the imagination, and thus as cultural constructions and not as realities. But some of them do not hesitate to explore how close some of the stereotypical labels under examination come to elements in real life, and what interventions and policies they engendered.

In his essay on Western images of the prophet Muhammad, **Lucien van Liere** is able to demonstrate, by adopting a very large chronological range covering the Middle Ages up till the Italian Renaissance, that in theological thinking the portrayal of Muhammad is remarkably stable. Concentrating on three particularly significant episodes, Van Liere shows that christian theologians, from John of Damascus through John Wycliffe to pope Pius II, continue to interpret Muhammad foremost as a false prophet, and that most of the stereotypes used to portray him derive from that idea of an anti-Christ. The varieties he sees in this pattern, for instance in the depiction of the prophet's alleged sensualism, depend partly on how knowledgeable theologians were, and partly on how much a threat Islam at that particular moment was to Christendom.

¹⁸ Cf. M. Beller ed., *L'immagine dell'altro e l'identità nazionale: metodi di ricerca letteraria* (Fasano 1995); J. Leerssen, 'The rhetoric of national character: A programmatic survey', *Poetics today* 21.2 (2000) 267-292; M. Beller and J. Leerssen eds., *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey* (Amsterdam 2007); J. Leerssen, *Spiegelpaleis Europa. Europese cultuur als mythe en beeldvorming* (Nijmegen 2011). The imagological work of Leerssen is strongly informed by the earlier comparatist enquiries into the nature of images by Hugo Dyserinck. See: H. Dyserinck, 'Zum Problem der "images" und "mirages" und ihrer Untersuchung im Rahmen der vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft', *Arcadia* 1 (1966) 107-120; H. Dyserinck and K.U. Syndram eds., *Europa und das nationale Selbstverständnis. Imagologische Probleme in Literatur, Kunst und Kultur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bonn 1988); H. Dyserinck and K.U. Syndram eds., *Komparatistik und Europaforschung. Perspektiven vergleichender Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft* (Bonn 1992).

Such a combination of knowledge and perceived dangers or opportunities also informs the imagining of the Mongol people, examined by **Emily Allinson** on the basis of a discussion of ten geographical maps produced in the West, from the twelfth to the early sixteenth centuries. While demonstrating how an increase in information, in part due to travel reports by people like Marco Polo, quickly fostered a more detailed image of the Mongols, Allinson also perceives a double-edged characterization, where negative and positive qualities alternate and are balanced. Mongols are seen as monsters, as cannibals, and thus as non-human, but they are likewise envied for their wealth, their impressive clothing and their monumental architecture. Here we touch upon a process of myth-making regarding a people at the edge of the known world. This also explains why in the representation of the Mongols the presence of a demarcation wall – at the outer limit of the globe – is dominant, and how this imagery could survive for many centuries after the Mongol Empire had vanished.

How strongly conditioned by such processes of myth-making our perception of reality is, comes to the fore in **Thérèse Peeters'** essay on the representation of the 'Sacco di Roma', the violent 1527 episode where underpaid troops of emperor Charles V looted the capital of Catholic Christendom. In her survey of some of the many reports by eye-witnesses, she sees that in most cases the documentary base of the report is framed in rhetorical conventions conditioned by topical commonplaces, thus obstructing a direct knowledge of the protagonists' experiences and emotions. While explaining this on the one hand as a strategy of trauma-management, certainly called for in such violent circumstances, she stresses, on the other hand, that an in-depth understanding of the cultural constructedness of historiographical accounts is called for.

This particular insight is essential in understanding the nature and tenacity of the images of 'otherness' discussed by **Johannes Dillinger** in his essay on vagrants in early modern Central Europe. Most of the stereotypical negative qualities consistently attributed to vagabonds and beggars can be related to contemporary fears of misfortune – diseases, fire – and explain the unrelentless prosecution of these persons, as if this would help in preventing such adversities. But Dillinger also discusses a different category of vagrants, amongst whom notably the so-called 'Venediger' or 'Wahlen', who were reputed to possess secret alchemical knowledge, and hence could be consulted not only to counter adversity but also to gain good fortune. Dillinger shows how this geographically rather circumscribed phenomenon

was grounded in specific historical situations – Italian merchants visiting the region while looking for minerals to be used in the Venetian glass industry – and that this imagery developed into a topical repertoire quickly absorbed in folktales, losing its links to the specific situations from which it sprang.

Dillinger's essay also addresses a peculiarity of early modern image-building – the apparently unproblematic presence of logical inconsistencies – that we find in other circumstances as well, like in the case discussed by **Felicia Roșu**. Curiously, all of the knowledgeable vagrants examined by Dillinger are extremely poor. While they are anxiously sought for by locals in order to help them find gold or other treasures, they themselves remain unremittingly penniless. Such oblique lines of thought also inform the long-term image-building on Poles and Hungarians that Felicia Roșu studies in Romanian early modern chronicles. Here respect, fear and loathing alternate and sometimes mix, depending on both circumstances and on explicit policies. Being on the one hand closely related to Poland and Hungary, while on the other hand aspiring to gain prominence in its own right, both politically and culturally, the Romanian region – Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia – developed an ambiguous attitude to its neighbours, as the sixteen chronicles dating from the fifteenth till the eighteenth centuries here examined demonstrate. Whereas an Orthodox bishop like Macarie, strongly committed to combat Catholic proselytism in mid sixteenth-century Moldavia, could easily voice a series of offensive stereotypes on the Polish, this caused concern to other compatriots more interested in good relations to Poland who then made sure a new and more neutral version of the chronicle was written. Decisive, however, in determining which perspective to adopt – respect or loathing – were not the relations between these three closely linked peoples, but the other at their common horizon: the Turk. Whenever the Ottoman Empire threatened to become a security risk, the ranks were closed, and only in periods of détente there was room for mutual loathing.

Such a common enemy at the horizon was only a very hypothetical circumstance in the relationship between the Poles and the Dutch. In his essay on the Dutch view on Poland as voiced in eighteenth-century spectatorial journals, **Jan Urbaniak** hence cannot but ascertain that this imagery is consistently negative. Here we find many elements from the conventional repertoire of stereotypes denouncing a lack of civilization. But as Urbaniak convincingly argues, such imagery has much more relevance for the proper Dutch situation than it has as a reflection on Poland. In line with

the educational mission of spectatorial journals, here the Polish case serves just as an almost virtual counter-example – because not in any way grounded in serious observation – meant to show the Dutch audience what civilization entails. This ambition becomes all the more apparent in the few instances where Poles are praised, for instance for not allowing their women to dominate their husbands, a situation that according to a Dutch contributor to the 1767 issue of *De Filosooph* is recurrent in Holland, clearly much to his regret.

A parallel glance by way of contrast on what the Dutch in the eighteenth century considered ‘civilized’ is offered by **Han Jordaen** in his essay on colonial Curaçao. Concentrating on the Dutch colonist’s attitudes towards the island’s coloured and Catholic populace of free citizens – mostly ex-slaves and their descendants –, Jordaen observes a consistent policy of distrust and criminalization, motivated by lack of understanding or respect of these persons’ cultural habits. The clash of cultures particularly occurs with respect to ideas on ownership and sexuality, where the colonizers’ critique of their coloured compatriots’ flexibility logically reveals their own rigidity in these matters. But as Jordaen compellingly argues, such conflicts over cultural differences ultimately are motivated not by ethical considerations, but by clear-cut power politics of a small white populace constantly in fear of being overthrown by its coloured counterpart.

Precisely because they cover such a large chronological and geographical range, the seven essays that follow draw our attention to some of the recurrent attributes of stereotypical thinking about others. Grounded in an antagonistic line of thought based on the perceived oppositions between the self and its others, the urge to focus on alterity, both in positive and negative ways, signals moments and instances of change and transition where perceptions of identity are challenged. As the essays here presented show, an in-depth analysis of situations where this bipolarity comes to the fore can help us understand both the continuities and contingencies in the history of ideas and mentalities.