

‘I didn’t get into history to avoid math or physics’: Interview with Patricia Seed, Professor of Rice University

Last year, FEEGIs inaugural vice-president, Professor Patricia Seed of Rice University, gave a fascinating lecture for the honours students of the Crayenborgh course at the History Department of Leiden University. After lunch Leonard Blussé and Patricia Seed had a chat about upbringing, maturing and computer games.

First of all, how did you get into the field of history? We are talking about the late 1960s, aren’t we?

I had a charismatic high school history teacher at Scarsdale who collected exotic orchids in South America (a practice since banned). He managed to make Spanish America sound like the most intriguing place on the planet. I was hooked.

I understand your parents wanted you to go on in the applied sciences. What is the story behind this? Were there ideological issues?

No, I’m the oldest of three siblings, all of whom are in biology and medicine. Since my father, uncles and grandfather were and are also in medicine, and my mother was a biologist, they have frequently wondered where I came from. Fortunately, if you move my hairline to the back of my head, you would be looking at my father’s face. I don’t have a clue as to where my interests came from either. Anyhow, my parents were horrified that I went into history.

Where you did you get your academic formation?

I went to Catholic schools for most of my early schooling, as well as university. First the nuns, then the Jesuits! And then my Master’s degree in history from the University of Texas at Austin and finally a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin.

That’s quite a jump—from a Jesuit school to Texas.

I would call it a culture shock.

What was your motivation for that Great Leap Forward?

The Latin American Center was very well known. One of my first teachers was the legendary Nettie Lee Benson, for whom the Library in Austin was named. She spoke the most heavily Texas-accented Spanish I had ever heard. But she was passionate about Mexican history of the national period, and her enthusiasm was contagious.

Who else was teaching in Austin at that time?

Jim Lockhart was there, Richard Graham, Magnus Mörner...

Sorry for interrupting, but a Swede, some Yankees... Weren't there any South Americans in that field?

Yes, there were several, but mostly they were only at Texas temporarily. My most memorable visitor was the late Angel Rosenblatt.

What was your MA thesis on? Was it on South American history or on anthropology?

For my MA thesis I reinvented economic anthropology. I didn't know it at the time, but obviously I found out later. It just seemed to be a reasonable way of understanding the data. I used the financial records of a long-operating estate in east-central Mexico. The estate started with sugar and slaves in the sixteenth century, and by the mid-eighteenth it was selling pulque (a locally produced alcoholic beverage from the Agave cactus) in the Mexico City market. These estates were entailed, itself a rarity in Mexico, and belonged to the Counts of the Valley of Orizaba. The valley's name comes from a small volcano just north of the central trade route between the port of Vera Cruz and Mexico City.

Were you as a student specifically influenced or impressed by anyone?

Around 1971 Jim Lockhart was a charismatic public lecturer, and his social approach to history was intriguing. I specifically went to Wisconsin, to work with John Phelan, the colonial Latin Americanist, who suffered a massive heart attack less than a month before I was due to arrive in Mexico to start my field work.

What about Philip Curtin? He was the Godfather of the Wisconsin school, wasn't he?

Yes, Phil Curtin founded the program that included John Phelan. Latin America was simply a subdivision of the euphemistically named 'Comparative Tropical History.' That's what my diploma from Wisconsin

actually says. Comparative tropical history meant Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia; areas which were also called the 'Underdeveloped World' and now the 'Postcolonial World.'

And those other great men, Jan Vansina and John Smail...?

No, I didn't study with either one. I didn't study with Vansina because of the legendary hatred between Curtin and Vansina. They could not stand to be at the University of Wisconsin at the same time. (Mind you, this was a sixty plus person department, so they could have dodged each other.) But if Vansina was teaching, Phil Curtin would be on leave or out of the country. And vice versa. Both were on leave my first year at Wisconsin, and Curtin was around my second year. John Smail was a well-liked teacher; I just didn't see his field as closely linked to Latin America as it was connected to Africa.

Tell me about your Ph.D. thesis.

The Ph.D. thesis created the core of what became *To Love, Honor and Obey*, my first book. I didn't go to Mexico intending to study marriage. At the time studies of race and social status were in vogue, so I went there intending to work on the Mexico City census of 1752, and look for allied documents that might illuminate the way census takers categorised individuals according to racial and social categories. Four months into this project, I realised that the kind of information I wanted was organised in such a way that it would take decades to mine the data. I only had a year and a half. What I managed to salvage from the initial project became 'Social Interpretations of Race: Mexico 1752' in the *Hispanic American Historical Review* which people still read and cite.

Had this any connection with C.R. Boxer's writings about Portuguese race relations?

No, although I had actually met Boxer in Austin. He came to give a series of lectures, which later became his last book: *Women in Iberian Expansion Overseas, 1415–1815*. I found him a charming, congenial British gentleman of means, a very recognisable social character. But at the time I met him, and read his works after meeting him, I did not take his material into my thesis on Mexico City. Unfortunately, then, as today, scholars of Latin America remain sharply divided between Spanish and Portuguese speakers. Few researchers on Portugal's overseas empire read any of the material on Spain's overseas empire and vice versa. Students of modern Brazil rarely read works on modern Mexico. For most Americans

the linguistic barrier is the greatest—because all too few scholars are familiar with both languages. For the Latin Americans themselves a variety of cultural and national prejudices often deter comparative efforts at scholarship. There are plenty of Argentine jokes about Brazilians, Brazilian jokes about Argentines, and so forth. It's a fairly familiar genre in the international prestige game.

Why is your article still cited?

Perhaps because I argued that the category of 'race' is (and was) socially constructed—not in itself an unusual argument—but I employed statistics to analyze how census-takers and priests employed racial categories. Uniting a social constructivist argument with statistical techniques was, and I guess still probably is, fairly uncommon. Another reason might be that I looked at a wider range of potential influences on 'race' than was usual—the employment of women and children and type of residence. Additionally I tracked individuals from the census to marriage, christening and bequests to the church to see how racial categories were assigned differently. This process is often misnamed 'passing' but it works both ways.

In what year have we arrived by now?

Phew... 'Social Interpretations of Race?' 1982 perhaps? Anyhow, I think it was very badly written, because I hadn't learned to write for humanities audiences. As a result the text appears very condensed. I actually invented three new statistical techniques that are in the footnotes of that article. I subsequently wrote them up in statistical journals.

You seem to enjoy applying the exact sciences in your research.

In 1983 I explored new statistical techniques as well as the then-new approach in mathematical physics called chaos theory to study interracial marriage and religious de-conversion processes. But the opportunities for further dialog with other Latin Americanists on these technical issues were extremely limited so I abandoned the idea of making this a full-scale research project. In short, I didn't get into history to avoid math or physics. I just got in to figure out where cultural, political and social patterns of behavior came from.

I know you first of all as an anthropological historian. When did you turn anthropologist? Is this after you met George Marcus, your husband?

Actually, yes. When we met George was putting on the seminar whose papers were later published as *Writing Culture*. He introduced me to a whole series of books that I had never read—or been interested in reading before. When he handed me Susan Handelman's *Slayers of Moses*, I was hooked. I understood religious hermeneutics from my religious schooling, and had gained a smattering of knowledge of Jewish hermeneutical traditions. So everything fell into place.

When did you two meet?

In 1983. George was at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton the year I arrived at Rice. He had heard about me because Stuart Schwartz had told him about me. But when he returned to Rice University, he couldn't remember my last name. He knew my name was agricultural. He thought I was Patricia Corn instead of Patricia Seed! Actually people kept pushing us, shoving us, 'oh you should meet, you two should really meet.' And then we finally met and I gave a talk at his department and sparks flew. High drama!

This was after that first book had come out.

No, that was in '88. We met in '83. I was doing the revisions on that book then. I was writing a lot of other things at the time, mostly statistical. But I was working my way through a literary and anthropological reading list.

Your first book—it's about marriage and about ceremony? I'm wondering why you didn't include the gender factor or, for that matter, the ceremonies of marriage, the rites de passage and how these affected this kind of ceremony. I didn't think that such an idea fit the topic. I wrote about the theological assumptions behind Catholic marriage (before and after the Council of Trent), but not with the ceremony itself. The only political ceremony that you can say is in any way gendered is the English action of possession and it's only gendered because the English thought of their act of possession in gendered terms.

That is the same as in traditional Dutch Law. The wife is onbekwaam, unfit. There is much more on this in my new book, *American Pentimento: The Invention of Indians and the Pursuit of Riches*. In the first line of the book I talk about spending ten years browsing through bookstores in Europe and Africa, Asia, Australia and New Zealand and looking for any books on history. I didn't come across American history books or histories by American authors. I found American fiction, books on computers, on

HTML, but not American history books. Even Australian, English and New Zealand bookstores carry few, if any, American historians.

Do you mean books on America or books by American historians?

Books by American historians. Books by American historians have an audience solely in America. The US has a very large internal market but it's not the world. So the idea that you do world history for an American audience doesn't mean you're doing it for the rest of the world because other people are going to have different visions as to what constitutes the world.

Couldn't one make the same point on French historians?

Yes, I do feel the same way about French history, but the French don't seem to have found it necessary to write the History of the World (from the vantage point of France). They seem to concentrate on histories of their own terrain—and those of their former colonies.

Would you agree that world history as taught in the US is rather a kind of recipe to deal with issues in the US itself than a really new approach to history. Is not it very ideologically motivated?

I quite agree. In the United States world history is a ground-up phenomenon, which is why there are no world historians at the Ivy League and similar universities. The course usually replaces the Western Civilization course—the one that began with Greece and Rome and ended with post-World War II United States. That course originated at a few elite universities early in the twentieth century, but never became popular until after the Second World War. 'Western Civ' (the usual name of the course) created a narrative that explained why all children of European immigrants belonged in America—by positively portraying European history up to and including the moments of greatest European immigration. World History, on the other hand, arose because of the dramatic increase in Asian immigrants to the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s South Vietnamese refugees, of Chinese and Taiwanese Nationalists, and Indian and Pakistani physicians and computer programmers all came to the United States. When their children began to be educated in the United States, their past had no place in this Western European narrative, and so when their children began to enter the school system in large numbers they created a demand for the story of their pasts to be included as well. So world history was Western Europe plus China (at least initially).

I don't mean to shoot my own foot or yours, but aren't most of the American FEEGI members really American colonial history-oriented scholars? What should we do about that?

I don't really know membership numbers, but in FEEGI's defense I can say that it has successfully drawn Canadian historians into the group. From Europe, this is a minor achievement, but in the hemisphere it remains unusual. All we can do about it is to expose US historians to excellent European scholarship. To achieve that end, it might make sense to have FEEGI meetings every third year in the Netherlands, making it easier to attract European scholars. If we were to do that, I think that it would be vitally important to integrate all the panels, that is, not allow any sessions to be composed strictly of members from a particular nation's education system.

Take, for instance, the problem of language. I find it very interesting that some teachers in the US say: if students want to study Italian or Spanish, let them study the language in those countries. They will never learn it in the US.

That's a real problem, compounded by the prevalence of English as an international means of business communication. Perhaps the reason why teachers urge their students to go abroad is that at all levels US schools and universities teach languages very poorly.

In that sense I find intellectual life at American Universities a bit stifling. People seem often so much taken hostage by ongoing debates, paradigms. This also has its good points because it focuses research, but somehow it also makes it very difficult to carry on new research of one's own, don't you think so? I ask because you seem to be pretty good at setting your own agenda.

You more kindly characterize what I call 'group-think' as 'paradigms.' Failing to conform to one or more well-understood and well-known paths of inquiry becomes most disabling when securing research funds in the US. If you cannot disguise the originality of your work successfully, you don't get funded. Of course you can do your own research, but you have to be willing to make financial sacrifices in order to do so.

What have you learned from theoretical or applied techniques or, let me put it differently, are you interested in the work of historians working on cultures in Asia and Africa?

Absolutely. It's what I call respect for the native point of view—one of the fundamental ethical tenets of anthropology. If you are writing about the Netherlands, for example, you have to read what Dutch historians have to

say about the subject. After all, it's their language, their culture, and their tradition. You need to respect that. The same thing goes for Malaysia, for example. If I want to write about Malay history, I have to understand how Malays write their history and why. And when disagreeing, you need to respect your overseas counterparts. In Europe, I particularly admire Dutch and Portuguese historians. The secondary and higher education systems in both countries have produced extremely able academics in the last twenty years. As you probably know well, their work is underappreciated in the United States, in part because of the lack of knowledge of those languages in this country.

You are, after all, mainly a Latin Americanist, aren't you?

Sort of. I've actually become much more involved with the history of cartography and navigation in the years immediately preceding Vasco da Gama's voyage to India. This includes studying Latin America, but also takes me to the Davis Straits (between Canada and Greenland), South Africa, the straits of Malacca and the like. My Latin American interest remains, but I have become more interested in Latin America as part of an integrated, nearly global network. Portuguese and Spaniards overseas might be a better way of phrasing it.

During the course you gave yesterday you mentioned various games and teaching techniques including your site on the web. Please explain.

Pedagogy is one of the more interesting arenas of research at the moment, largely because the generation currently enrolled in universities differs greatly from the preceding generations. The revolutions in communication, the internet, cell phones, live-from-the battlefield pictures have transformed students' preferred means of learning and doing research. While some people made this argument about television, I don't think of that as true. Television was conceived as an entertainment medium; the internet was created by scientist seeking a better means of communicating and sharing knowledge. The printed book's centrality as a source of knowledge has changed greatly. Many professors don't seem to have realised how quickly the world of their students has shifted. I use computer, board and role-playing games as vehicles for teaching an introduction to history because by the time they reach university undergraduates have spent a good part of their lives playing games, dissecting, and criticizing them. In short they arrive with an existing critical apparatus that can be sharpened and refined by showing how narratives, plots and arguments influence the way you re-tell history. Additionally, games allow telling the same story from

different points of view, so students do not receive a monolithic idea of History.

What's your agenda? Is Ceremonies really the first volume of a series of books? American Pentimento was the second volume in the series—dealing with the persistent images of native peoples. The third volume will deal with narratives of warfare, but in the meantime, I've taken a detour into histories of cartography, navigation and science.

You mentioned tensions in the family when you took up history. What about that?

My family could not understand why someone talented in mathematics and biology would voluntarily go into history. It was (and still is) completely beyond them. But they do understand my interest in the history of science, and are fans of my top-rated website called *Latitude: The Art and Science of Fifteenth-Century Navigation*. Interestingly enough, however, humanities audiences seem unable to make sense of the site because I refuse to adopt a linearly defined narrative. But science teachers, scientists and quite a few major scientific institutions think it's just fine!

