

Slavery, Migration and the Atlantic World:

Interview with Piet Emmer

Professor P.C. (Piet) Emmer studied history, and earned his Ph.D. at the University of Amsterdam in 1974. He has written and edited several books on the history of the Atlantic world, Dutch colonial slavery and migration history, including The Dutch Slave Trade, 1500–1850 (2000), The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy (1998) and The General History of the Caribbean (1999). Professor Emmer has held a chair in the History of European Expansion and Migration History at Leiden University since 1991, has served as a visiting professor at the University of Texas at Austin, and was appointed a member of the European Academy of Sciences (Academia Europaea) in 2004. This semester Damian Alan Pargas caught up with him in his office in Leiden.

Professor Emmer, you've had a long and distinguished career as a historian of the Atlantic world, colonial slavery and global migration. How did you become interested in these interrelated fields?

First of all, I think I should object to the word 'distinguished.' It has been a long career, but whether or not it's distinguished remains to be seen! Anyway, the answer to your question is very simple, banal really. As a graduate student, I was asked by my advisor to write a Master's thesis on a Dutch slaving voyage, and it all started from there. There is a wonderful archive on the Dutch trade, and more specifically the slave trade, in the Atlantic in Middleburg, Zeeland. The archive of a Middleburg-based trading and slaving company has remained complete, and you could actually follow the actions of the individual captains, of the Company's directors, etc, from year to year. And studying the slave trade, it was virtually impossible not to look into what happened with the slaves—and that led to the study of slavery itself. Then, after the abolition of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery, other migration streams take over. All that followed from this one MA thesis on the history of the last official Dutch slaving voyage.

Your Ph.D. research was also on the Dutch slave trade?

Well, it was more specifically on the ending of the Dutch slave trade, and the effects of the ending of the slave trade on the economy of the Netherlands, as well as those sections of the African coast where the Dutch had the most contact, and of course the effects on the receiving end—the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean.¹

Why do you think there was no large abolition movement in the Netherlands, like there was in Britain or the United States?

I think we should rephrase the question and ask ourselves why was the abolition movement in the UK and in the US so popular. My feeling is that the Dutch case was much more normal. In the Netherlands, the experts mainly discussed colonial matters. What's remarkable is that in Britain the ending of the slave trade and slave emancipation became a hotly debated issue, among people who'd never seen a slave, never seen the slave trade in operation. It's possible that they'd seen empty slave ships in port, but what happened on the Middle Passage and on the plantations was something that most abolitionists only learned about by reading pamphlets and other literature. I think the amazing thing is that people became interested in this topic and that they united their indignation on a social basis, and that this resulted in a mass movement that became instrumental in abolishing the slave trade and slavery—both of which were still very viable economic institutions.

Obviously, if the slave trade and slavery had not been profitable, it would have been far easier to abolish them. Normal practice at the time dictated that the market would take care of everything. If the slave trade and slavery were losing propositions, private entrepreneurs would stop investing in it, and that would be the end of it. And, of course, that is not what happened. Even at the height of the abolition debate, the slave trade was still growing and so were the number of slaves. And in spite of all the evidence suggesting that it was profitable, in spite of the fact that slave prices kept rising—which is an excellent indicator of the viability of the slave trade and of slavery—in spite of those indications, it was abolished for political and ethical reasons. Only after Britain had abolished the slave trade and slavery in its own colonies did economics dictated the interest of Britain in abolishing the slave trade and slavery elsewhere in order to prevent unfair competition with its own ex-slaveholding colonies.

*Your book, *The Dutch Slave Trade (De Nederlandse Slavenhandel, 1500–1850)*, was published in 2000 and received a lot of publicity.² What was your*

motivation in undertaking that research and how did your interpretations compare with earlier works on the slave trade?

Well, in fact that book was the result of many years of research and study, in addition to reading the works of other historians of the slave trade and slavery in the Anglo-Saxon world, France, Spain and Portugal. During the past forty years, there has been no historical field with so many rapid developments in quantitative, social, economic and anthropological approaches as the study of the slave trade and slavery. I tried to do justice to these studies, and in many ways my book reflects the international debates and the results of the international research providing more accurate data. I combined that with my own research on the Dutch slave trade and on slavery and abolition in the Dutch colonial world.

The fact that there was so much upheaval when the book was published had to do with the fact that, of course, the Dutch readership at large had not been aware of these international developments and of the course that the international debate was taking. I think that one of the issues that sparked a lot of interest—and sometimes indignation—was my insistence on the fact that the ending of both the slave trade and slavery was not caused by economic factors, but by ethical motives. That is not always easy to accept. Another issue was the fact that slaves taken from Africa and sent to any of the plantation sectors of the Americas—particularly North America but also the Caribbean or Brazil—were not necessarily worse off in economic terms than if they had remained in Africa. Actually, it seems that all immigrants who went to the New World, be they forced or free, were usually able to increase their standard of living. That was important in a world where people were chronically undernourished and frequently died of starvation in Europe, Africa and Asia. Those results—which were not of my own research alone, but of that of a whole range of researchers—seem to have come as something of a shock to some readers in the Netherlands.

What were the prevailing views on Dutch slavery and colonial history when you began your career?

Well, in many ways, because of the limited number of monographs and articles on the volume of the Dutch slave trade and on the nature of slavery in the Dutch colonies, there was very much the same feeling here that prevailed in the Anglo-Saxon world—especially before the 1970s, when Fogel and Engerman's *Time on the Cross* sparked a revolution in slavery studies.³ And that was that slavery and the slave trade were institutions that were not very economically sound, that these were institutions designed

to degrade Africans, and that the tremendous profits that had been made by the slave trade and slavery were instrumental in making the West rich. Those were the prevailing views in the 1950s and 1960s, and in Holland they continued to exist much longer than in the Anglo-Saxon world.

And in Holland the larger debate about whether colonialism was good or bad also continued much longer than in the neighbouring ex-colonial powers such as the UK or France. When I first started to specialise in this field of history, the general view was still that colonialism was ‘a good thing.’ That view was mainly advanced by former colonial civil servants and, I guess you could say, the ‘colonial lobby’ in the Netherlands. In spite of the difficult decolonisation of the Dutch East Indies, they continued to insist that colonialism was beneficial for all concerned. In the same period, however, the public aversion against the Dutch colonial past increased and in the late 1960s and 1970s the advocates of decolonisation and independence were becoming much more vocal. I personally think that it is a stifling debate, and not very conducive to historical research, but that was the state of affairs when I finished my Ph.D. dissertation. After my book was published, I received some letters from both sides; some congratulating me on my objective view of the Dutch slave trade, but also of course there were letters of protest and indignation.

Why do you think especially the descendants of former slaves reacted with indignation?

It’s a very complicated issue to explain. In general, you could say that black people whose ancestors were forcibly moved from Africa to the New World have better and sometimes even much better chances of economic improvement than the descendants of the slaves who remained in Africa. However, the descendants of slaves sold into the Atlantic slave trade have been robbed of their cultural roots. And in the long run they haven’t done as well as some other immigrant groups in the New World, such as Europeans and Asians. In order to explain that many blacks in the New World look at the past. There is no doubt that their ancestors arrived in the New World on a different footing from those who are now doing better. So obviously the two must be connected. That, I think, is what has stimulated many blacks, particularly in the US, to take an interest in the history of slavery, in the hope of finding reasons to explain the discrimination and low economic and social status that they face.

By the way, the interest in the history of slavery differs considerably among the various ex-slaveholding areas of the New World. It is most pronounced in North America. Among blacks in the Caribbean and in

Brazil there seems to be less of an urge to blame the past for the problems of today. It's really ironic that among blacks in the US, where the advancement of the descendants of the slave population has been most pronounced, the indignation about what brought them there, and how they were used as slaves, is strongest. In fact, there is no black population in the world with such a high average income as that of the blacks in the US. Of course, compared to other immigrant groups within the US the situation looks different, and it is that perspective that has sparked the public interest in the history of the slave trade and of slavery, and has led to a whole new ethnic industry with 'black studies' departments at universities, travel agencies specialising in study tours to the roots in Africa, and films and TV serials about these historical topics.

How did the Dutch colonial experience in general in the New World compare to that of other European powers, such as the British and Iberians?

I would argue that the British and Iberian experience in the Atlantic was different from that of the Dutch and the French. The Dutch did not establish very large settlement colonies, and I think that made all the difference. The Dutch mainly concentrated on the exploitation of the tropical sections of the Atlantic (and of Asia for that matter), and that explains to a certain extent why the lasting impact of the Dutch Atlantic was more limited than that of the British. In the British Atlantic, we see in the eighteenth century a growing market in the settlement sections of British America. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Atlantic market became increasingly important to Britain as she was losing markets on the Continent. Certainly, part of that increase was not only caused by more buyers in North America, but also due to the booming economies of the plantation colonies in the Caribbean. The economic importance of the markets in the New World was far less to the Dutch. The Dutch slaveholding colonies were not nearly as dynamic as those of Britain. However, the combination of having a settlement colony in the North with a growing market consisting of people who are on average wealthier than most European consumers, in addition to a dynamic set of slaveholding colonies in the Caribbean, was absent in the Dutch case. And that's why I think the impact on the Dutch economy of the Dutch colonies in the New World was only very limited.⁴

Why do you think there was no large-scale migration from the Netherlands to its colonies in the New World, like there was from Britain to North America? That's an excellent question and a very difficult one to answer. The propensity to migrate among Europeans in the various countries differs widely, even today. And we only have some vague indications why this is so. First, one of the explanations is that the internal mobility in a country is related to the external mobility. In other words, the number of emigrants is larger when the internal mobility in a country is high. The internal mobility in Holland was not very high, and when regional shortages in the labour markets occurred the Dutch resorted to importing labour from outside the Netherlands—much more so than was the case in Britain. The Dutch were not alone in this. France was a country with less internal mobility and certainly less emigration than the UK. So, again, the British were unique in having both a high internal mobility and a high emigration rate. Secondly, the Dutch were able to send many young, unmarried, poor males abroad, but they were used as sailors and soldiers in the tropical sections of the world rather than as colonists. In the Atlantic, the Dutch trade was directed mostly towards the tropical zones, and less towards the non-tropical ones. In Asia the Dutch did the same. The Dutch-Asiatic shipping project at Leiden University revealed that the Dutch East India Company sent about one million men to tropical Asia, half of them non-Dutch. Less than half eventually returned to Europe. So my feeling is that the Dutch obviously felt that it was more to their commercial advantage to explore and exploit that dangerous, lethal niche of tropical colonial trade, rather than to send large numbers of colonists overseas as the British did. In Britain, small planting companies financed by a couple of merchants succeeded in bringing the colonists to North America, and those small companies did not exist in the Netherlands, or in France for that matter.

*In a chapter you wrote for the recently published volume, *A Deus ex Machina Revisited: Atlantic Colonial Trade and European Economic Development* (2006), you opened with the sentence: “Globalization” is a term coined by journalists in order to impress people who don’t know history.⁵ What did you mean by that?*

I think there is a strange idea that the world during the last ten or fifteen years has become more globalised than before. In fact, the peak of the development towards globalisation is far behind us. If you look at the percentage of goods not produced in your own country, but produced elsewhere, it was higher in the period of the 1500s, 1600s. Then the national economies started growing much more rapidly than the international

economy. Now, of course, it's increasing again. But compared to the goods and services produced either domestically, or in neighbouring countries, or on the same continent, we're still dealing with a small percentage of really global trade. More products are now produced in countries that were traditional importers, and it has always been attractive to import cheaper goods from outside, provided they have a similar quality to the goods produced at home. But if you look at the trade of those countries with a small domestic economy such as the Netherlands, Norway and, say, Luxembourg—and there are few countries in the world where trade makes up such a large share of the GDP—you will see that first of all most of the trade is domestic, then second in size is the trade with neighbouring countries, third in size is the trade within the developed countries of the Western world, and the trade with the Third World is smallest in size. So the whole idea of globalisation is, I think, a straw man.

The reasons for European global expansion in the first place are the source of much debate among historians. What do you think was responsible for stimulating European expansion?

Obviously, there is a combination of motives. Some of it, in my view, can be attributed to a spirit of pure inquisitiveness. To try and sail around Africa, not really thinking about trade or penetrating the interior, but more just to see what the world looked like, I think that is typically European. Obviously that spirit was lacking elsewhere, because sailing round the globe was technologically not impossible for others. The Chinese, the Indians or the Arabs could have done the same thing. It's a myth that Europeans expanded because they were technologically superior. Research has shown that the 'big divide' between European technology and that of the rest of the world is something that came later. So Europeans were inquisitive about what the world looked like, what other people were doing and not doing. In addition, there were also private investors in Europe who felt that they could make money by sending ships and sometimes colonists to non-European parts of the world. That financial drive is also something that is lacking elsewhere. The Chinese could have done the same, and they did send colonists to other sections of Asia, but not further away. And eventually they closed up the country, and that would have been impossible to do in multi-nation Europe. Europeans were always in competition with one another. Trying to conquer overseas possessions outside Europe became a sign of political prestige in Europe. That was another reason for European expansion. Another point that is perhaps sometimes overlooked is the fact that Europe was the only continent, I think, where it was

possible to migrate freely. In other words, in Western Europe migration was an individual decision. You could move 200 or 300 miles away in the hope of improving your standard of living. That was very difficult to do in, say, Africa. Lone travellers on any road in Africa were like walking bags of money for the slave traders. I'm not so sure what the situation was in Asia. It could be that it was possible there to move—protected—to another place. But I think Europe was unique in the sense that in many parts of Europe it was possible to make an individual decision to migrate, and that an individual could travel safely over long distances. In Germany and elsewhere in the centre of Europe, people had a choice whether to move eastward or westward. Most people in Germany moved eastward, towards what are now Russia and the Balkans, while a smaller percentage moved westward. In view of the geographical location of Britain, of course, it stands to reason that long-distance migrants from Britain moved to the New World.

Contemporary migration, especially from developing nations to Europe and North America, has become a much-debated issue, both within the Netherlands and abroad. Elsewhere you've advocated an 'open door' immigration policy.⁶ Would you mind explaining this theory?

Well, the argument is very simple. If people are allowed to move where they want, we'll have unrivalled economic growth. People will then settle where they feel they can use their talents best. And they will be able to compare their income before and afterwards, and thus be able to detect whether or not they've made the right decision in choosing to migrate. In an ideal world, that is the best possible procedure. People should be allowed to move freely and settle wherever they want to. In the real world, it's more difficult. The history of economic growth in the United States during the past two centuries can only be explained by open immigration. If there is a developed country with an open door policy, then the United States certainly comes very close. Everything is relative, of course, and I know all the hassle you now have to go through when you want to migrate to the US officially. I've been a victim of that bureaucracy there myself. Yet, it's a country that makes it possible, legally or illegally, for large numbers of people to come in. Anybody with a drive to earn money and do an honest job is accepted in the US. Whether you do it illegally by climbing over a fence at night or whether you do it by the book, anyone who enters the US with the intent to work and try to improve his status, legally or illegally, can stay, and will meet with a lot of understanding, if not sympathy. That is something that is ingrained in American society.

Now let's look at Europe. First of all within their continent, Europeans are not nearly as mobile as the population of the US. Today, if you're a farmer in Sicily you earn just one-third of what a labourer in Munich earns, and yet you see virtually no migration any more between Sicily and Munich. Also, migration out of Europe has been drastically reduced since the economic growth of Western Europe started to pick up after the ravages of the Second World War. That means that to Europeans migration became a strange phenomenon, something for a limited number of refugees from the communist block who managed to slip through the Iron Curtain.

Migration had become something for losers. And because Western Europe had become static, it could construct a welfare state that is unique in the world. The solidarity in that welfare state—the financial solidarity and the social solidarity—is extremely high. That welfare state is very generous for those living in that state, but hostile to immigrants, particularly if they threaten to take more from the welfare state than they give. That explains the present attitude in Europe, and that's why I think that advocating an open door policy is now mostly an academic undertaking in Western Europe. Because in Western Europe you can only be an advocate of the free movement of people if at the same time you advocate abolishing the welfare state.

The European Union has implemented an open door policy of sorts, albeit on a smaller, continental scale. What do you think will be the consequences of opening national borders within Europe for individual welfare states?

I think what we want to do is have the best of two worlds. We want to keep the welfare state, but open the borders within Europe. At the same time we realise that nowhere is the population ageing as rapidly as in Western and Eastern Europe. Migration movements from Eastern to Western Europe, from the new member states of the EU, are declining and will never be substantial and permanent. In the past, a similar mechanism operated between Southern Europe and Western Europe, when Spain, Portugal and Italy had become members of the EU. And as soon as these new member states began to experience a higher economic growth than the old, industrial heartland of Europe, like the UK, the Netherlands and France, migration stopped and the Spanish, Portuguese and Italians stayed put. Actually, Spain is now the country with the largest immigration of all EU member states. Emigration can change into immigration very rapidly. That is now happening with migration flows from the Ukraine, Russia and Belarus to Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. And

after Bulgaria and Romania become member states you will again see an upsurge in emigration and then a decline again as soon as the economies of these new members grow more rapidly than those of the older EU states. You do not need absolute equality of wages in order to stop people from migrating, but long before that point migration will decline as long as the growth rate at home is increasing. And after the migration from Rumania and Bulgaria has levelled off, the EU needs to consider the immigration from non-western countries. That will not be an easy decision as the non-EU immigrants from Turkey, Morocco and the Caribbean have done very poorly in the past. Brussels could perhaps set standards for that, in designing a green card system for example, or a points system. At this very moment, most European countries are designing new immigration laws using very selective criteria. So if you admit people into your welfare state you make sure that in the end they will contribute more than they take out, or at least not become a burden on the welfare system, as some previous groups of immigrants have been.

Would an open door immigration policy benefit only the West, or would the sending nations also benefit?

Both. We should not exaggerate the negative impact of emigration on poor countries, but studies have shown that emigrants—particularly the first generation—do actually send a lot of money back home. Some of that money is used for conspicuous consumption, for example to build houses that stand empty most of the year or buy big cars. It has also been shown that in very poor sending countries money is often used to enable the family of the emigrants to buy extra food and clothing. However, there is a whole range of countries where family members use that money to set up small businesses. For the US, it's Mexico. For the Netherlands, it's Turkey, Morocco and Suriname. In contrast to the official developing aid, it's very unlikely that that money sent home by emigrants will wind up in some under-the-counter deal or in a numbered Swiss bank account. So remittances can be beneficial and stimulate development, although if you look at the numbers you would need a very small sending country with a very high percentage of emigrants to really make it work. Yet the Philippines obtain 6 per cent of their foreign earnings by way of money sent home from emigrants. But, say for India, it's important but it's very small in relation to the economy as a whole. It goes for all countries, though, that official developing aid amounts to only half, or one-third, or even a quarter of what is sent home by emigrants. So I think that private remittances are really the way forward.

The other side of the debate is the problem of brain drain, because the emigrants who are educated in the countries where they are born are some of the most attractive immigrants in the rich West. In most poor countries the education of students is paid for by the public purse, and that makes emigration similar to a loss of investment, detrimental to the sending country. But you could argue first of all that that is an internal problem in the developing country. If they offer free education to those who are most likely to emigrate, they should change that system by taxing those who leave or by charging tuition for university education. Provide free education only for those who remain in the country. Anyway, developing countries could have devised a system to make it work, but the ruling elite likes to provide its children with an education that is paid for by tax money. And secondly, you could argue that educated emigrants can sell their expertise and skills at much higher prices in the West than at home. 'Brains' are an excellent export item. If you can't sell your products on the world market, sell your brains. And that's what's happening at the moment.

Studies on migration have increased substantially in the past decade. Do you notice any general patterns in the direction that new historical research on migration is taking?

Yes. We're learning more about the reasons why people decide to migrate, both economic and non-economic reasons. We're learning more about the migration policies of the migrants themselves—stock migration, family migration. We're learning more about the sexual divisions among migrants: for example why it is that unmarried men migrate more than women, and whether there has been a change over time. So I think migration research is important and is changing. But there is still too much of a divide, I feel, between the study of European migrants in the western world and of non-European migrants in the rest of the world, such as slaves and indentured labourers. In the case of the migration to the New World, European and African migrants have traditionally been seen as so very different that scholars did not even dare to think about making such comparisons. While you must keep in mind the differences between free and unfree migration, in some cases a comparison can be fruitful. For instance, we always thought that racism was behind the terrible conditions aboard slave ships. Hundreds of slaves were confined to a very small space, and suffered high mortality rates *en route* to their destination. But research on European migrants to North America in the eighteenth century has actually revealed that in some instances the space

on board allotted to German migrants in the eighteenth century might have been even smaller than that of the slaves. So if you want to explain the higher mortality rates on the slave ships, the allotment of space might not have been as important as the difference in disease environment or different conditions before boarding. That's one example of how fruitful a comparison between free and unfree migrants can be, and the study of these two groups has been separated for too long. So, there's still a long way to go.

What are you working on now?

At this very moment, I'm working on a book summarising the history of the Caribbean. I think we have learned a lot lately from different perspectives on the slave trade and slavery, compared to what we used to know about it fifty years ago. And those new views have not yet penetrated the existing overviews of Caribbean history. My feeling is that we need to reconsider the historical stereotype of the Caribbean as a region equal to a hell on earth. A region where none of the immigrants actually wanted to be. The slaves would rather have stayed in Africa; the Europeans had come out only in order to make some money and to return; and the Asians were offered a free return passage before they left Asia. However, when we look at the material conditions of the immigrants, we should realise that the region acted as a life buoy to many. That is what I would like to point out. I realise that the Caribbean has never been able to offer the opportunities and economic growth rates that North America was able to offer, but to many it was far better than the opportunities they had at home. The historiography regarding the immigration of Asians into the Caribbean is a case in point. Traditionally indentured labour from Asia has been seen as a new type of slavery. On the other hand, of course, it's remarkable to see how many people actually tried to migrate as indentured laborers to the ex-slaveholding colonies in the West Indies and how many decided to stay and not use the free return passage. How do we explain that dichotomy? Western historians see a continuation of slavery, and at the same time historians of Asia are trying to explain the huge supply of mobile labour in India, Java, China, Japan and the Philippines. How could an ex-slave society in the New World be attractive to migrants? Was the standard of living there higher than in Asia? That is one of my projects.

The second project is to keep writing on present-day migration problems, and to try and arouse public interest in the wider view of migration. We need to do away with the narrow and negative view that

many people in Europe now have of migration, and I think that's where historians can play a role.

Notes

- 1 P. C. Emmer, *Engeland, Nederland, Afrika en de slavenhandel in de negentiende eeuw* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).
- 2 P.C. Emmer, *De Nederlandse slavenhandel, 1500–1850* (Amsterdam: de Arbeiderspers, 2000 and 2003). Translated as *Les Pays-Bas et la traite des Noirs* (Paris: Karthala, 2005) and as *The Dutch Slave Trade, 1500–1850* (New York: Berghahn, 2006).
- 3 R.W. Fogel and S.L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974).
- 4 P.C. Emmer, 'The Dutch and the Slave Americas', in D. Eltis, F.D. Lewis, and K. Sokoloff (eds.), *Slavery in the Development of the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 70–89.
- 5 P.C. Emmer, O. Petre-Grenouilleau, and J.V. Roitman (eds.), *A Deus ex Machina Revisited: Atlantic Colonial Trade and European Economic Development* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
- 6 P.C. Emmer en H. Wansink, *Wegsturen of binnenlaten? Tien vragen en antwoorden over migratie* (Amsterdam: de Arbeiderspers, 2005).

