Introduction: Building bridges

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This edited volume has been compiled to thank and honor Theo Engelen on the occasion of his retirement from the post of full professor of historical demography. Moreover, the book is also a token of the authors’ gratitude for all the efforts made by Engelen as dean and as rector to maintain and improve the reputation of the Radboud University in general, and the Faculty of Arts and the Department of History in particular, and to connect the university further to the larger academic world. Engelen was for 48 years – from 1970 until 2018 – affiliated with the Radboud University (formerly known as Catholic University Nijmegen): 6 years as a student and 42 years as an employee. During this long period he has held more or less all the academic positions obtainable at a university: student-assistant, PhD student, postdoctoral researcher, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, vice-dean, dean and rector. Although he spent considerable time in management roles, especially during the most recent years, most of his academic career was devoted to teaching and conducting research on the history of what he considers the core of human existence: love, sexuality and death (De Groot & Schreven, 2006). In this introduction, we will briefly describe and reflect on Engelen’s academic life course, and explain how this volume is organized.

Life and work of Theo Engelen

Theo Engelen was born in 1950, the oldest child in a non-academic family. He grew up in Geulle (Limburg), in the southernmost part of the Netherlands. After finishing the local primary school he went to Henric van Veldenke college in Maastricht, where he graduated from the gymnasium
(grammar school) in 1970. Upon his graduation, he left Limburg’s hilly landscape in order to study history at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. While in those days Nijmegen was also known as ‘Havana on the river Waal’, because of its extremely left-wing political orientation, Engelen did not join any student associations, and kept his distance from student protests, as he was aware that there were always two sides to each story. However, he took part in the demonstrations against the Vietnam War, as to him it was crystal clear who was wrong on the battlefield.\(^1\) We also know that Engelen was inspired by the hippie movement, and especially by the idea of improving the world in a peaceful way (Meijerink, 2014).

After studying history for four years, a lecture by Professor Ad van der Woude from Wageningen University on historical demography immediately fascinated Engelen. In many ways Van der Woude, who had worked extensively on the population history of the Netherlands and enjoyed an international reputation, inspired the young Engelen. Under the supervision of Van der Woude, Engelen started to conduct his first tentative empirical research. The two got along very well and their relationship was strengthened by Van der Woude’s practice of staying overnight with his Nijmegen students when he made the journey from Wageningen. Van der Woude would shape Engelen’s future academic career, as is reflected by the fact that Engelen dedicated his demographic history of the Netherlands to his former professor (Engelen, 2009). Thanks to Van der Woude, already during his studies Engelen had become convinced that there is no better way of investigating the lives of people from the past than to study the information from demographic sources that are still available today. Engelen’s time as a student came to an end when he graduated *cum laude* in early modern history in 1976 (Haverkamp, 2014; Cuppens & Sleutels, 2018).

While Engelen had been a student-assistant from 1974, upon his graduation he became a regular staff member of the history department and started to teach, as well as taking on some managerial responsibilities. An important moment in Engelen’s career came when he was officially appointed as an assistant professor in 1982 to the section of economic and social history (see also Klep, this volume). This appointment, however, did not pass unnoticed; in fact, it even reached the national press, and caused students to protest, as they were in favor of a very left-wing candidate for the job (see also Brabers, this volume). Soon, however, peace returned, as it became clear that Engelen was an enthusiastic, inspiring and approachable lecturer, as well as a productive researcher.
Shortly after Engelen was appointed assistant professor, he began, under the supervision of Professor Paul Klep, to write a PhD thesis on the fertility decline in Limburg, the Netherlands (Engelen, 1987). At the time this historical topic was of great interest not only to historians and (historical) demographers, but also to contemporary development specialists, as the lag in fertility decline in African society was high on the agenda of the United Nations and the World Health Organization. The case of Limburg was interesting, because it was one of the regions in Europe where fertility decline was considerably delayed, and it was believed that an insight into the causes of the delay in fertility decline in a historical population would help improve family planning programs in the contemporary developing world. Engelen reached the conclusion that fertility decline was dependent not only on familiarity with and availability of contraception, and the (economic) motivations for making use of it, but also on the moral acceptance of intervention in human fertility. In the case of Limburg, religion, i.e. Catholicism, acted as a cultural filter which delayed the application of contraception. On 11 September 1987 Engelen defended his PhD thesis cum laude.

Engelen also held several positions outside the Radboud University. We mention at this point two in particular which were important for his career and the larger field of economic, social and demographic history. From 1995 to 2003, Engelen was research director of the Dutch inter-university postgraduate academy for economic and social history, the N.W. Posthumus Institute. In this post, Engelen shaped the Changing Labor Relations in a Comparative Perspective, Western and Non-Western (later called Household and Labor) program and managed to put historical demography more visibly on the research agenda of the institute. He guided many PhD students, both implicitly and explicitly, in the direction of his own research specialism, historical demography (see also Hillebrand or Schoonheim, this volume). On the international level, Engelen’s influence increased when he became co-editor-in-chief of The History of the Family: An International Quarterly, a position which he held from 2001 to 2011. Under Engelen’s editorship, The History of the Family, which from its beginning had been a journal with a good reputation, became one of the leading international journals in historical demography and family history in the world.

The work of Engelen became truly international when he set up the Population and society in Taiwan and the Netherlands project with Professor Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford University) and Professor Ying-Chang
Chuang (Academia Sinica). As well as producing several articles in international peer-reviewed journals, this project resulted in the influential book series *Life at the Extremes: the demography of Europe and China* (see also Gates & Shepherd and Chuang, this volume). These publications are devoted to systematic comparisons of nuptiality, fertility and mortality behavior between Europe and Asia, and are considered to be must-reads for everybody who is interested in Eurasian historical demography (see also Riswick, this volume). As his collaboration and friendship with his American and Taiwanese colleagues intensified, Engelen also began to give guest lectures at Stanford University, and during the academic year 2004/2005 he was a visiting scholar at Academica Sinica. During that time he worked on a book that became part of the *Life at the Extremes* series, which compared the demography of Nijmegen (the Netherlands) and Lugang (Taiwan) with each other (see Yinghui Hsieh, this volume). The *Population and society in Taiwan and the Netherlands* project forged connections with Asian academia, which he used later as dean and as rector to enlarge the network of the Radboud University, and to recruit promising students from this part of the world. For example, it also resulted in a PhD project that compared female-headed households in the Netherlands and Taiwan (see Lin, this volume). In sum, the Eurasian work had an important influence on Engelen’s academic career, as also becomes clear from his inaugural lecture from 2006, which he gave upon his appointment as the first professor of historical demography in the Netherlands (in 2005). In his public lecture, he addressed the debate on deliberate fertility control in the Netherlands and Taiwan and came up with an interesting alternative view as to why Chinese marital fertility had been so much lower than Thomas Malthus had postulated.

Throughout his career, Engelen has made an enormous contribution to the education of history students. This ranges from seminars and lectures in general bachelor’s and master’s courses on history to more specialized thematic courses in which historical demographic behavior was the center of attention. Engelen gave lectures in almost every course on economic, social and demographic history, and supervised a great number of bachelor’s, master’s and PhD theses; he also taught statistics for some time. Many generations of students will never forget the name of Thomas Malthus, and his ideas on the relationship between resource development and population growth, nor will they forget about the demographic transition theory. Engelen has the ability to explain complex ideas by providing everyday examples and rendering them vivid with his sense of humor. He
taught students, for instance, that breastfeeding is important in the study of fertility, as it has a decreasing effect on women’s fecundity, and he made everybody laugh when he added the warning that they should not try this at home as a method of contraception. Besides his lectures, students also praised Engelen for his approachability and for putting actions to words (Ligtenberg, 2014b).

Historical demography as a mission and a passion

In his research and teaching, Engelen used to preach that historical demography is the only specialization in the history department – apart from writing biographies – that brings us closer to the lives of our ancestors. It offers us a unique window into people’s private lives in the past. First of all, historical demographers study the beginning and end of every life, as well as the most important transitions in a life course, as most of them are of a demographic nature: leaving the parental home, starting the first job, being promoted, marrying, having children, divorcing, retiring, et cetera. Second, historical demography offers opportunities which other specializations in history lack, as historical demographers have source materials at their disposal which cover the total population of historical societies. This is exceptional. After all, political historians deal with public documents, which inform us mainly about the decisions taken by the few people in a society who exercise political power. Cultural historians have to limit themselves mainly to those who were able to read and write, and economic historians only have detailed information on those people whose income was high enough to pay taxes. Consequently, most historians are occupied with the history of small minorities in historical societies, and neglect the less powerful majority. Historical demographic sources, by contrast, offer the opportunity to study all layers of a population and to include the lives of both men and women, and to systematically compare them (Engelen, 2009).

Historical demography allows us to understand how characteristics of a population (e.g. size and composition) influenced historical processes, such as industrialization, democratization, secularization and so on, and how these processes in turn shaped the demographic composition of the population by ways of migration, nuptiality, fertility, and mortality. By applying a life-course perspective, historical demography connects the micro-level of individual lives to macro-level processes and vice versa. To
be able to do this, historical demographers include the context in which lives are embedded, such as households, (kin) networks, and communities in the analyses. All of this requires high quality multi-layered datasets and specific database management skills as well as the know-how of complex statistical analyses, such as regressions, event history analyses and sequence analysis, methods which are mainly applied in the social sciences. Engelen understood that these techniques were important for making advances within the discipline of historical demography, and that students should become familiar with these techniques, but that this should not happen at the expense of the historical narrative. Consequently, during his career Engelen tried to bridge the widening gap between historians with a limited background in statistics on the one hand and sociologists with a lack of knowledge on historical societies on the other, by combining the art of the historian with the data skills of the social scientist. He himself made the utmost effort to teach his students basic statistical techniques and sent them to more advanced statistical courses, but he also made sure that both historians and social scientists attended historical demographic conferences.

Because of his duties as dean and rector Engelen had to temporarily postpone his work in historical demography. When in 2015 he resigned from the position of rector, he could have left academia, as by that point he had reached the age of retirement. He decided, however, to return to the history department and to take up his former role as a professor of historical demography. He continued his research on The Rhythm of Life, a book project which is devoted to seasonal patterns of births, marriages, and deaths, which links history not only with the social sciences, but also with biology (Van den Broek, 2015b; Van Ham, 2015). The fact that he did not retire in 2015, but returned to historical demographic research, shows that historical demography has remained his chief mission and his great passion. Moreover, it demonstrated that he practiced what he preached, as he always argued in the debate on the retirement age that people should retire later as their lifespan had increased considerably in the period since this age was originally determined.

**BRIDGING WORLDS**

As Engelen’s career developed he became a man of many worlds – Stanford and Taipei became his second and third homes – which he increasingly tried to connect to each other. He turned out to be an excellent builder of
bridges: not only between scholars and students, but also between disciplines and between academic research and teaching. The ability of Engelen to build bridges between scholars became even more required as he became the vice dean, and later the dean of the Faculty of Arts at Radboud University. In this context, he wrote himself: “There is only one thing more difficult than leadership, and that is academic leadership” (Engelen, 2016, p. 7).² He knew that personal contact was key to keeping the faculty together. When he became dean in 2013, Engelen wanted to get to know every person within the faculty personally and was greatly in favor of scholars looking beyond their own department (Cobussen, 2012). Furthermore, Engelen took up the challenge of defending the humanities in his new role as chair of the Disciplineoverleg Letteren en Geschiedenis (Discipline Counsel Arts and History) (Zuidweg, 2014). Engelen was the first dean to show that it is possible to combine a humanistic view with managerial capacities (see Van Mulken, this volume).

When Engelen was appointed as rector in 2014, his ability to build bridges between disciplines was not only useful but also necessary, as he had to represent the whole university. In his role as rector Engelen argued that the university should unite itself more. In deeds this was done by adding, for instance, the missing medallions of the social science and management faculties to the official chain of the rector. From that moment onwards all faculties were symbolically represented on the chain (Van den Broek, 2015a). In addition, Engelen continued to defend not only the humanities, but the whole academic community, against bureaucracy imposed by a distrusting government. During the opening speech of the academic year 2014-2015 he made this explicit by asking the minister to save the academic staff of the university from any further changes and to create more trust, realizing that the bridge between the government and the university was crucial for the optimal function of the latter (Haverkamp, 2015; see, for a reflection on the function of rector, Van Krieken, this volume).

Engelen’s scientific rigor, his national and international collaborations, as well as his warmth and generosity, are typical of those scholars who have a calling for the field. All those who have met and collaborated with Engelen – students, doctoral students, colleagues, et cetera – have always had his unconditional support, and whenever necessary he acted as a mediator. Over the years he has remained the person with the friendly face, who also has an eye for the human being behind the scholar (Ligtenberg, 2014b). In a team he managed to create an atmosphere of mutual
respect, made sure that the contributions of different team members were acknowledged, and strived not only for academic excellence, but also for an optimal balance between the academic job and the private life of the scholars involved (Ligtenberg, 2014a). The number of those who owe their professional and personal formation to Engelen is beyond count. The title of this volume is therefore, appropriately, Building Bridges: Scholars, History & Historical Demography. The contributions stem from scholarship inspired by Engelen in one way or another. It is a tribute to him, and symbolizes the academic mission to keep searching for new answers to old questions and to pose new, even more challenging, ones.

We have organized the contributions of this volume into three sections, beginning with 'Building Bridges between Scholars'. This part of the book addresses Engelen's academic life course in more detail by examining his appointment as assistant professor and his role in the section of economic and social history. Furthermore, there are several contributions in this section which are of a personal nature, in which the authors share and reflect on the memories they have of working with Engelen. These personal contributions demonstrate the special connections that Engelen made with scholars both academically and personally.

The second part, 'Building Bridges within the History Department', includes contributions from a selection of scholars in the History Department of the Radboud University who have worked together with Engelen, most of them for a long time. All these authors are in some way inspired by Engelen's work and/or Engelen as a person. Most of these contributions also provide a reflection on how, in the broadest sense, historians can connect to each other's work in a world of ongoing specialization, and to (historical) demography in particular. The contributions include a broad range of topics: some of them are ones on which Engelen himself worked, while others are further removed from his own research specialization.

In the third and last section, 'Building Bridges within Historical Demography', the contributors write on topics connected with the work done by Engelen in the field of historical demography. The topics range from household structure, marriage patterns, and Eurasian comparisons to research on historical trends and seasonal patterns in fertility and mortality.
This section makes it clear that Engelen himself contributed to many important debates in historical demography and will continue to do so in the future.

REFERENCES


1. This is also something that comes back in his writing of fiction books for children that demonstrate his dislike for thinking in black/white or good/bad. For example in his books about the Second World War there are also ‘good’ Germans, scared resistant fighters and NSB members that are doubting their position. See for more information Van den Brock (2014) or Cuppens & Sleutels (2018).

2. Translation of “Er is maar een ding moeilijker dan leiderschap, en dat is academisch leiderschap” in Engelen, 2016, p. 7.