

Pioneers in Migration History, an Introduction

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This special issue of *TSEG – The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* is dedicated to Marlou Schrover and Leo Lucassen, who will both retire in 2026. The volume is presented to them on the occasion of their farewell symposium, held in Leiden on March 27, 2026. With this special issue, colleagues from the Netherlands and abroad honor two scholars whose work has been foundational to the development of migration history as a vibrant, analytically rigorous, and socially engaged field of research. We write this introduction on behalf of the editors of this special issue, Liesbeth Rosen Jacobson, Manon van der Heijden, and Nadia Bouras, and from within the academic community that Marlou and Leo have helped to build over more than three decades. Their influence extends far beyond their individual publications. They have shaped research agendas, trained generations of students and doctoral candidates, built intellectual infrastructures, and consistently insisted on historically grounded, empirically careful, and conceptually precise scholarship. Just as importantly, they have done so in a spirit of generosity, collegiality, and engagement that has left a lasting imprint on Leiden University and on the wider field of migration studies.

Migration pioneers

Marlou Schrover and Leo Lucassen are widely recognized as pioneers in migration history, not only because of the topics they addressed, but also because of how they fundamentally reoriented the field. Their work

challenged static, nation-centered, and often ahistorical approaches by treating mobility as a normal, structural, and historically embedded feature of social and economic life. Long before migration became a dominant object of public and political controversy, they demonstrated that it is neither exceptional nor inherently disruptive, but constitutive of societies across time and space.

A defining feature of their scholarship is a shared commitment to *longue durée* perspectives, comparative analysis, and conceptual precision. Both consistently resisted a narrow focus on the present and crisis-driven narratives, insisting instead on historical contextualization, careful empirical work, and analytical restraint. At the same time, they developed distinct intellectual trajectories that expanded the scope and ambition of migration history in complementary ways, opening the field to new questions of scale, categorization, inequality, and power.

Leo Lucassen's work has been crucial in embedding migration history within comparative, transnational, and global frameworks. From his early research on Roma and other itinerant groups to his later work on migration regimes, labor mobility, and global migration history, Leo persistently pushed the field beyond methodological nationalism. He demonstrated how categories such as 'migrant', 'foreigner', or 'illegal' are historically contingent, politically produced, and embedded in shifting regimes of labor, citizenship, and state power. His scholarship bridged labor history, social history, and global history, offering analytical tools that reshaped how migration is studied.

Leo initially focused mainly on specific migrant groups and the significant influence of state formation processes on the treatment and exclusion of mobile groups. Yet his research on, among others, 'gypsies' also gave him insights into larger patterns, and his expertise has become much broader and much more oriented towards global processes and comparative patterns of migration. He is primarily interested in the role of institutions and the way in which they are decisive for the acceptance and settlement of migrants. Leo argued in his work that open institutions are crucial for explaining regional differences in the permanent settlement of migrants. To do so, he developed a typology model, which showed that both access to institutions and strong family and birthplace ties appeared to be decisive for settlement.

Together with Wim Willems, he also conducted research on the attractiveness of cities. Here, too, immigration and migrants' decisions to move to urban areas were linked to urban institutions. They jointly edited a book, later translated as *Living in the City*, in which the various

political and socioeconomic aspects of urban attractiveness were brought together. He subsequently edited and published, together with scholars such as Patrick Manning and his brother Jan Lucassen, numerous books and articles in which he further developed migration patterns in a comparative perspective. Finally, he also wished to share his insights with a broader audience and wrote several accessible books on migration in the Netherlands and Amsterdam over the past five centuries.

Marlou Schrover's work, by contrast, fundamentally reshaped migration history by placing gender at the center of historical analysis and by consistently insisting on an intersectional approach. She demonstrated that gender cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed in relation to other axes of inequality such as class, ethnicity, sexuality, and legal status. In doing so, she showed that migration processes are structured by overlapping and mutually constitutive power relations, which shape opportunities, trajectories, and outcomes in historically specific ways.

Equally central to Marlou's scholarship is a strong commitment to multidisciplinary. Drawing on insights from social history, gender studies, sociology, media studies, law and policy analysis, her work moves deliberately across disciplinary boundaries. This range has enabled her to interrogate not only migration practices themselves, but also the production of knowledge about migration. A recurring focus of her research is the language of migration governance and the interaction between scholarship, media, and policy. By critically analyzing how categories and labels are constructed, circulated, and institutionalized, Marlou has shown how knowledge production actively shapes both academic interpretation and political decision-making.

Marlou also attached great importance to public engagement and media outreach. She regarded it as a core responsibility of the historian to explain how migration actually works, historically and structurally, beyond academic settings. Throughout her career, she actively sought dialogue with a wide range of audiences, including government agencies, policymakers, political parties, civil servants, journalists, civil society organizations, as well as smaller grassroots initiatives and large public lecture audiences. Through frequent media appearances and public talks, she aimed to counter persistent myths, simplifications, and crisis framings of migration by providing historically grounded explanations. This form of engagement was not ancillary to her

academic work, but closely connected to it, exemplifying her commitment to clarity, accuracy, and societal relevance. Together, their contributions have normalized migration as a core subject of social and economic history rather than a marginal or policy-driven subfield.



Leo Lucassen



Marlou Schrover

Leiden and the ESG team

Their intellectual legacy is inseparable from the institutional context in which they worked. Marlou joined Leiden University in 2003, followed by Leo in 2005. Within a remarkably short period, they transformed the Economic and Social History (ESG) section of the Institute for History into an internationally recognized hub for migration research. Through collaborative projects, as well as a shared vision of what migration history could and should be, they created an environment in which innovative research could flourish.

Both Marlou and Leo are internationally renowned scholars, and this is evident not only in their important roles in various national and international migration networks, journals, and other scholarly organizations. In addition, they received highly prestigious awards in recognition of their work. In 1998, Leo was awarded a NWO pioneer project on the assimilation of immigrants in the Netherlands. In 2006, Marlou was awarded a prestigious VICI grant for a large-scale project on postwar migration to the Netherlands and gender. Over the course of her career, Marlou also obtained a NWO Veni grant and an Aspasia grant, achievements that not only attest to the originality and ambition of her research agenda but also enabled her to create sustained research

environments for others. The crowning achievement of her work was the awarding of the “Dilemmas of Diversity” research project within the Dutch National Research Agenda (NWA).

Migration became one of the key themes and defining features of Leiden’s historical scholarship, and this important shift in focus and perspective aligned with the new intellectual climate emerging at the Institute for History in Leiden. Increasing attention was paid to historical processes, overlooked groups, and to viewing the Netherlands as part of a global development. This shift was also reflected in teaching. Marlou brought the dimension of gender and the intersectionality of class, gender, and ethnicity more explicitly into the curriculum. Together with several Leiden colleagues, a new textbook for social and economic history was written, which has been used in first-year courses since 2011. It is no coincidence that the book was titled *De Wereld en Nederland* (The World and the Netherlands).

In addition to leading the ESG section, Leo and Marlou also fulfilled important administrative roles in Leiden. Leo established the interdisciplinary research specialization *Leiden Global Interactions*, which connected and showcased the expertise of various institutes within the Faculty of Humanities. As Academic Director of the Institute for History, he discovered, in his own words, that he actually “quite enjoyed leadership”. Although his appointment as Research Director of the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in 2014, and later as its Director in 2020, meant that he spent less time physically in Leiden, his intellectual and pedagogical presence within the Institute for History remained substantial. Marlou was not only involved as chair of the ESG section, but she also took on various administrative responsibilities. In recent years, she served as chair of the Institute’s Advisory Board – a role she fulfilled, as always, with great energy and dedication.

Both Marlou and Leo are widely regarded as inspiring and generous lecturers. Like Marlou, Leo also considered public engagement and media participation an essential part of scholarly responsibility. He regularly contributed to public debates through (social) media appearances, lectures, and policy-oriented discussions, using historical comparison to contextualize contemporary migration controversies. By bringing long-term and comparative perspectives into public debate, Leo consistently sought to demonstrate how migration works over time and across societies, and to temper alarmist or ahistorical framings. His courses consistently challenged students to think beyond national

frameworks and short time horizons, encouraging them to approach migration as a historical constant shaped by changing regimes of labor, citizenship, and mobility. Even after his formal move to the IISH, Leo remained closely connected to Leiden through teaching, supervision, and collaborative research, embodying a model of scholarly commitment that transcended institutional boundaries.

Through his dual positioning in Leiden and at the IISH, Leo also played a crucial bridging role. He connected Leiden-based research to large-scale international collaborations, archival infrastructures, and global labor history networks, thereby reinforcing the outward-looking orientation of the ESG section. In this sense, his Leiden years cannot be separated from his broader institutional impact: they were mutually constitutive and together shaped a generation of scholars trained to think comparatively, globally, and historically about migration.

Beyond research leadership, Marlou in particular functioned as the social glue of the section. From the moment Marlou arrived in Leiden, she worked to strengthen social cohesion within a previously male-dominated program. She cultivated a culture of collegiality, care, and everyday sociability that remains one of the defining characteristics of ESG. The daily communal lunches, the ever-present stroopwafels and fruit at meetings, and the symbolic ‘feminization’ of the corridors, replacing portraits of old white professors with colorful social-historical landscapes, were not incidental gestures. They expressed a vision of academia as a collective endeavor, grounded in equality, attentiveness, and shared responsibility.

With the arrival of Marlou and Leo in the ESG section, their convictions about gender equality and expanding opportunities for women were truly put into practice. They aimed to create a section in which both men and women had equal opportunities and where the balance became far more equitable. They succeeded: when Marlou and Leo joined Leiden, only two women worked in the ESG section, whereas today half of the team consists of women. Moreover, these are not, as is often the case elsewhere, the less senior positions.

Over the years, Leo supervised and co-supervised numerous PhD candidates affiliated with Leiden University, many of whom benefitted directly from his comparative perspective, his conceptual clarity, and his ability to situate individual research projects within broader global debates. Marlou supervised hundreds of BA and MA students and guided numerous PhD candidates, both internal and external, to completion. Her mentorship combined intellectual rigor with an acute

sensitivity to the structural and personal challenges faced by students and early-career scholars, particularly those working on politically and socially contested topics.

Her VICI project funded three PhD candidates and a postdoctoral researcher and played a formative role in consolidating Leiden's position within the international field of migration studies. One of the doctoral candidates, now co-editor of this special issue, was Nadia Bouras, whose academic trajectory, like that of many others, was shaped by Marlou's engaged, supportive, and intellectually demanding supervision. Marlou combined high scholarly standards with an acute attentiveness to the people she worked with, fostering confidence, independence, and intellectual curiosity among her students. Together with Liesbeth Rosen Jacobson, she founded the so-called small gathering, meant for all PhD-candidates in the section who were not part of larger projects to have their own space to discuss their research progress and struggles. This commitment to academic care and responsibility also found expression in her success in securing competitive research funding.

She was also a driving force behind the inter-university master's program Governance of Migration and Diversity, a collaboration between Leiden University, Delft University of Technology, and Erasmus University Rotterdam, as well as the associated research center. Both initiatives exemplify her vision of migration studies as a field that must remain analytically rigorous while being attuned to pressing societal questions. Through these programs, Marlou helped train a generation of students equipped to engage critically with migration governance in academic, policy, and public settings. The program embodies many of the principles that have guided her work: interdisciplinarity, societal relevance, and a critical engagement with migration governance.

Both Marlou and Leo were deeply invested in building scholarly communities beyond Leiden. They were long-standing and highly active participants in the European Social Science History Conference and the Social Science History Conference, contributing not only as presenters but also as organizers, convenors, and intellectual interlocutors. Within the Netherlands, they also played a defining role in the Posthumus Research School for Economic and Social History and the flagship journal of Dutch social and economic historians: *TSEG – The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History*. Their sustained involvement helped anchor Leiden firmly within international networks of social and migration history.

This special issue

The contributions to this special issue reflect the breadth, depth, and international reach of Marlou's and Leo's scholarly influence. Colleagues from different generations, disciplines, and national contexts engage with themes that have been central to their work: mobility and immobility, gender and labor, migration governance, scale, categorization, and the *longue durée* of migration processes.

Contributors include Ad Knotter, Peter Scholten, Patrick Manning, Annemarie Steidl, Lex Heerma van Voss, Marijke van Faassen, Rik Hoekstra, Colin Pooley, Manon van der Heijden, Ariadne Schmidt, Eveline den Hollander, and Ymke Vreeburg. Their articles do not merely pay tribute, but also actively extend, test, and interrogate the analytical frameworks that Marlou and Leo helped to establish. Several contributions explicitly engage with their conceptual interventions, while others demonstrate how their approaches have travelled across temporal, spatial, and disciplinary boundaries.

Taken together, the articles show how migration history has matured into a field that is methodologically plural, theoretically self-aware, and empirically grounded. They also illustrate how the questions Marlou and Leo posed about scale, gender, categorization, labor, and power continue to generate new research agendas and new forms of scholarly collaboration.

We offer this special issue as a collective gesture of gratitude, respect, and affection. It honors two scholars whose intellectual generosity, institutional commitment, and scholarly rigor have profoundly shaped Leiden University, the field of migration studies, and the many students and colleagues who had the privilege of working with them.

About the authors

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Liesbeth Rosen Jacobson earned her PhD from Leiden University in 2018, under the supervision of Professor Marlou Schrover, with a comparative study of decolonization in the Dutch East Indies, British India, and French Indochina, focusing on people of mixed European and indigenous descent. She has held teaching positions at Leiden University, Erasmus University Rotterdam, and Utrecht University. She is currently an archival specialist at the Municipality of Haarlemmermeer, where she explores ways of combining historical research and archival practice in the digital age.

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