Figure 1. Choropleth map of geographical orientations in master's thesis titles in the History of Society, 1983-2018

Figure 2. Hexbin map of geographical orientations in master's thesis titles in the History of Society, 1983-2018

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Mapping 40 years of thesis topics in the History of Society

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Historical culture is an important research field in our history department. Historical culture broadly entails the various relationships people individually or collectively maintain with the past. All too often, scholars make a distinction between historiography - the study of the historical discipline - which is serious business, and popular forms of memory, which can be manipulated, distorted, and abused for all kinds of purposes. Historical culture aims to do away with this normative binary opposition and studies historiography as one of many ways in which cultures make the past meaningful. My research focuses on metahistorical questions regarding conceptions of history, historical consciousness and historicity, but I always aim to operationalise abstract theory. Today's digital culture offers many opportunities to gather, analyse, and visualise data on how people give meaning to the past. By means of example, and in honour of 40 years of History at Erasmus University Rotterdam, I will illustrate this by literally mapping the geospatial foci of 40 years of master's theses in the History of Society programme. What were the places our students have been interested in? About which topoi did they write their master's theses and *doctoraalscripties*?

In order to gain insight into these issues I compiled a dataset consisting of author names, thesis titles and years of publication by scraping the WorldCat library catalogue. Theses published since 2006 have been made digitally available in the EUR Thesis Repository (https://thesis.eur.nl). The titles indexed under our master's programme were added to the dataset and duplicate entries were removed. This resulted in a dataset comprising of 895 titles of theses completed from 1983 to 2018. Next, the thesis titles were analysed with the natural language processing API Textrazor which provides named entity recognition for both Dutch and English texts including location entities.

50 percent of the titles contained an identifiable toponym and, of that group, 28 percent contained more than one place name. Textrazor returned a longitude and latitude per toponym. By itself this is not very meaningful as entire countries are represented by geometric points, i.e. Kenya is represented by a geolocation near Anghiti Restaurant in Nairobi (delicious Indian cuisine, but awfully small portions!). Yet this data does offer the possibility of identifying the frequency in which the geometric points occur within an already available dataset of national boundaries. The result is a choropleth map (Figure 1), which displays the count of geometric points within national borders in a gradient colour scale.

The map provides a lot of information about the geospatial orientation of the master's theses. The relative prominence of the Netherlands as a point of focus may come as no surprise but apart from that the map displays a truly global orientation. The former Dutch colonies are well represented but do not stand out in comparison to places that show less traces of Dutch colonial involvement such as India or Russia. It appears that the global is not necessarily approached through Dutch eyes – an observation that is confirmed by reviewing the thesis titles. The choice of geographical focus could have been that of the student but there were, and still are, structural incentives in the curriculum that influence the choice of focus. The expertise of the supervisors is one, but also courses, and particular thesis classes (or, as we call them, research workshops) influence the geographical focus. The existence of the research workshop "The Rise and Fall of the American Empire" can – for example – explain the steady flow of theses on US history that is visible in the 2010s.

There is also much information a choropleth map does not show or even distort. Firstly, the map takes nation states as the main geographical entities and prevents the visibility of transnational, regional and local research interests as cities, for example, are represented by the nation. Secondly, the represented nations are presented as static entities whereas the dataset contains theses about political entities long gone such as the Soviet Union. In order to solve the first issue (the latter is more complex to solve), I created a hexbin map that displays the density of features in a hexagonal grid, again with a gradient colour. In this map, polygonal – instead of geometric point – representations of political entities were retrieved from Openstreetmaps. The overlapping polygons per hexagonal bin were counted and finally the hexbin map was plotted. This provides a more nuanced insight into thesis topics. For example, Mexico seems to have attracted no interest as a topic but the hexbin map shows that Mexico City has. The same local focus counts for Nairobi and Buenos Aires.

All in all, this case study shows not only what the geospatial orientations of 40 years of master's theses in the History of Society programme were, but also that the multidisciplinary approach in terms of theory and methodology for which the History of Society stands is far from dead and may revive in the near future inspired by the digital humanities.

Further reading

The source code of this chapter can be found at: [https://github.com/rjadr/mapping-40-years-of-history-at-EUR].

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