Back to the future: a historical perspective on the climate crisis

Keynote address by Prof Dr Liesbeth van de Grift at the occasion of the 387th Dies Natalis of Utrecht University on 27 March 2023.

This is Eisenhüttenstadt, in the mid-1950s.* Located near the Polish border and depicted here by the East German painter Bernhard Kretzschmar. He shows us a city under construction. Rising in the background, the blast furnaces that were taken into operation in 1950. They were supposed to become the engine driving the industrial development of East Germany. In the lower right, we see the housing complexes that sheltered industrial workers and their families. With greenery and space between them for liveability’s sake. Eisenhüttenstadt was a model city. It was intended as an example: this was where the ideal society would take shape, founded on socialist tenets. And then, at the foreground of the painting: people out for a bike ride or walking the dog. Enjoying a moment of recreation in nature but in the background black plumes of smoke, churned out by the industrial complex.

This image is typical of the post-war years in Europe. In the wake of the massive disruptions of World War II, there followed a period of economic reconstruction in the East and West. The plumes of smoke represent industrial activity and increased productivity. They were the inevitable by-product of progress and at the time were not yet considered problematic. This applies not only to the socialist utopia, but to the Netherlands as well. See here the “Rolandsduin” campsite in Wijk aan Zee. The people who camped here, year in and year out, under the smoke of the blast furnaces, say they weren’t particularly worried about the coal

* Parts of this address were delivered as part of my inaugural lecture 'Eén wereld of geen. Politieke representatie in het Antropoceen' (One World or None: Political Representation in the Anthropocene) on 4 November 2023.
grime or the sulphurous stench of rotten eggs. Many of them still feel a pang of nostalgia when they think of “their” camping site shutting down, in 1992.

These two examples show that perceptions matter. If we want to understand why people are spurred to take action against environmental pollution (or not), or why governments enact policy, the actual existence of these problems – exposure to toxic chemicals, an increase of CO2 in the atmosphere – is only a part of the answer. It is equally important that we understand why something is considered a problem in one era of time as opposed to another. And that we recognise that perceptions and experiences may vary depending on the socio-economic, cultural, religious or ethnic group to which an individual belongs. Or the place in the world they inhabit.

Climate change, the loss of biodiversity, the exhaustion of natural resources: they call for a broad approach in which the life sciences, the humanities and the medical, technical and social and behavioural sciences make a concerted effort to work toward a solution. To understand what change is needed, but also to grasp why it progresses so slowly. To see that improvements here, in the Netherlands, in Europe, may entail a worsening of conditions elsewhere in the world. And to realise that we as an academic community are not separate from the system that brought us here; we do not exist outside it, but are a part of the whole. Such self-reflection benefits from a historical perspective.

Historical scholarship can help to reveal the extent to which existing mental frameworks and the way in which we organise the life of society are the result of historical processes. While this may seem rather obvious, it can drastically alter our view of the present, as I will argue here today.
A glimpse back at history shows how mutable ideas are with regard to what is just, democratic or legitimate. Historical research can help us to understand why some viewpoints came to prevail while others faded into the background. It makes us aware of the “historicity”, the time-specific nature, of certain mental frameworks. That time-specific aspect also applies to the institutions which organise our political and social lives and which, particularly if they have been around for a while, can be quite resistant to change.

Focusing on the theme of this Dies: after World War II, the discourse on economic growth and the gross national product as the gauge by which progress and development are measured became the determining factors for government plans and the ambitions of international organisations. Economic growth was seen as a precondition for guaranteeing a decent standard of material prosperity. The same goes for the discourse of “food security”, which played a decisive role in agricultural policies aimed at scaling up and increasing productivity and that maintained close ties with agricultural organisations. Both arose within the post-war context in which the economic crisis of the 1930s and food shortages in World War II were still very vivid in the minds of policymakers. Those experiences coloured their interpretation of the present and their imagination of the future – of what had to be done and what was necessary for this.

Knowing what we do today, we realise that human activity and its impact on the climate and atmosphere of our planet accelerated during this period.

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Recognising the historical origin of ideas, policy and institutions grants a kind of freedom. Freedom to ask yourself whether today they still provide a useful and relevant framework for understanding and structuring the world around us - and freedom to imagine an alternative future for ourselves.

Our University itself is such an institution with strong historical roots: its origins in the Middle Ages and based in Utrecht for an honourable 387 years. Its organisation into disciplines and faculties, its position in relation to the political, societal and commercial spheres have evolved over time. Existing structures – the way in which programmes are organised or power is apportioned, the routines that define our work – are, to invoke British sociologist Anthony Giddens, both enabling and constraining. Each one of us has been shaped within an intellectual context in which disciplines, sometimes combinations of disciplines, played a central role. We are all familiar with the limitations of those disciplines; at the same time we have experienced how difficult it can be to bridge disciplinary boundaries. There is an interesting puzzle at work here. Social structures, like academic disciplines, have been developed by people and we are the ones who reproduce those structures through our words and actions. We recognize their limitations and yet we – the academic community gathered here, but also society in the broader sense – experience difficulties when we aim to change them. When we come to realise that a given problem cannot be solved within the existing

frameworks (or that the frameworks themselves have become part of the problem). To understand these tensions, as said, knowledge of the past is imperative.

As historian it would be difficult for me to assume what the future holds and yet it does not seem controversial to say that we currently find ourselves in a such a process of change. Take the theme of this Dies. Just a few years ago, the Board would not have used the term *climate crisis*. This year's use of the term testifies to a shift in the conceptualisation of the problem by the Executive Board itself. At Utrecht University we are well positioned to analyse and explain such a change. For that, collaboration - across disciplines and the university's Strategic Themes - is crucial. The Board's problem definition is based on current knowledge on the state of the climate and biodiversity, on what needs to be done and how. Increasingly, ethical questions revolving around responsibility and fairness; democracy and public support are addressed. The university itself is an *institution for open societies*; one that transforms along with societal changes that are taking place. To what extent did climate protest actions, the involvement of or increased concern of its own employees and possibly the actions by other universities put pressure on the Executive Board to more explicitly express its concern? Furthermore, the role of younger generations, within the climate movement as well as within our own university, is key to these changes. 'Who has the youth, has the future': this saying has become ambivalent. In society and within our own organization, the younger generation is driving change with their changed mentalities, their choice of study program and internship and their demand for courses deemed relevant for their futures.

'Climate crisis' - it is important to note this shift. Because the perspective, the frame, that prevails in the public discourse also determines the direction in which solutions will be sought. The phrase *climate crisis*, for example, demonstrates an awareness of urgency. In the
past, the word *crisis* was used to describe the decisive moment in the progression of an illness: the point at which the patient either begins to get better or begins to succumb. A crisis is, in other words, an emergency. Talking about climate change in these terms sends a message that business as usual is no longer an option. The Deep Democracy discussions regarding partnerships with the fossil fuel industry are a logical extension of this: people are looking for new paradigms in an era when the old ones no longer seem effective.

This also includes: self-reflection. Let's use these Dies to ask uncomfortable questions. Who funds our research and what are the intended and unintended consequences? Are we preparing students for what their future will be? And can we do that at all? Do we listen sufficiently to their wishes and concerns? And how can the university, in the words of UvA rector Peter-Paul Verbeek, create 'interspaces' in which reflection and action, distance and involvement are valued?4 It is our task to start this conversation now, as a broad academic community and with an eye for the social context in which science operates.

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4 Peter-Paul Verbeek, *De maatschappelijke universiteit in een verwetsenschappelijke samenleving: een pleidooi voor tussenruimtes* (Amsterdam 2023).