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I would like to start my response with one line in the book: as follows:

‘Ultimately, then, common humanity represents the Archimedean point of the moral history of humanity.’ p. 556

I choose this sentence because in my reading it was not just an explanation for the topic of this book, it is also a deep motivation for the research on which the book is based.

‘Ultimately, then, common humanity represents the Archimedean point of the moral history of humanity.’ – and that is not just a history of an idea, but a history in which we all are involved. The implication is that it is our history and future.

So - First of all, of course, I would like to congratulate Siep Stuurman with this major (and also somewhat awe inspiring) achievement; this single-authored book, based on the revision, extension and elaboration of the initial Dutch work. We know how much reading, thinking, hard work was required to develop this argument, on the invention of humanity and the essential notions of equality and cultural difference in world history. A few years ago, we all embraced the first edition in Dutch, and now we are very happy with this international version.

So how should I respond to the book?

Let me begin my brief ‘response’ by highlighting just one section, which in my view shows how Stuurman has been reading the sources. It is in the Epilogue, at page 561, where he summarizes how early-modern Enlightenment tends to conflate the ongoing process of intellectual critique and revision, with the temporality of modern history itself, thus relegating all non-European intellectual cultures to the realm of the premodern. Stuurman then tries to think about an alternative for this modern / premodern dichotomy in early modern enlightenment thinking – were there alternatives? And he concludes that ‘it is extremely difficult, and probably impossible, to conceive of a notion of individuality that is atemporal and culturally empty, and yet remains historically credible.’ When you read that phrase ‘it is extremely difficult, and probably impossible’, than you can be sure that the author really has tried for himself to conceive and envision such a notion of individuality outside or beyond the realm of history, and that he would have proposed it to us, had he found a convincing
clue pointing at another direction. The book has many of such instances of deep thinking about ideas and the overall weight of their historical context.

So what does the book mean to me? I regard it as a history of ideas, addressing philosophy and the history of science (race science in particular), religion, law – international law like the references to the growing international sphere of justice, and human rights law – and as such in my reading the book offers an urgent contribution to an intersectional approach to political history. Important in that respect is the historical and conceptual meaning of actual, imaginary and normative frontiers, borders, color lines, of geographical divides or clashes of civilization. With its focus on border crossings, the book invokes all such divisions and distinctions, with their political implications.

Such implications for political history also speak from the explicit connection that Stuurman makes between ideas and doctrines. To stay close to my field of expertise, for instance, Stuurman discusses the conceptual complications regarding state building, nation formation and equal citizenship in the context of colonial and post-colonial India. He explores whether or how Gandhi addressed the deep-rooted thoughts, believes and social practices concerning difference and inequality in the context of religion, of colonial rule, and the postcolonial secular state. We now know, that in the wake of partition and the drama of state formation, this also would result in the longest existing constitution, drafted by Ambedkar. That constitution testifies of all the tensions inherent in both the generalizing and particularizing notions of equality within society, which, as the book shows time and again, exist alongside of each other.

This touches upon the concept of ‘the cultural nation,’ which, as Stuurman discusses, ‘displays an analogy with the concept of race’ (p. 557). Incidentally we also discussed the topicality of this analogy between cultural nation and race last week at the VU, at a seminar of our Migration and Diversity centre on ‘Racial Exclusion in and at the borders of Europe’. One of the topics in that discussion was the verdict contra Wilders for his ‘less Moroccans’-slogan, which—in accordance with jurisprudence in the Netherlands, under article 1 of the Constitution was understood as racism. It is a complex verdict, since it counters ‘cultural nation’ as a claim to exclusiveness, while interpreting ‘Moroccans’ as race. I wonder, Siep what you have thought about this recent court case?

So constitutions such as the Indian constitution or our own constitution are most valuable contemporary political texts to understand and direct the tensions related to generalizing and particularizing notions of equality within society. Another example is the Indonesian constitution with its preamble which refers to the inalienable right of people for independence, and the Panca Sila, the five principles that are basic to society. These panca sila are the believe in the one and only god (who might be found in different religions), the just and civilized humanity, the unity of the
people, the democracy which comes with inner wisdom and search for consensus, and finally social justice. Siep Stuurmans work offers many clues to understand from where this state philosophy came – it came from many directions, and at that time of independence claims it really expressed the hope for another constitution – meaning another establishment – of society after colonialism.

We know how strong the political tensions became, geopolitical, international, regional, between East and West, and within Indonesia. That is political history. Nevertheless I would like to end my brief reflections here, by showing a fragment of the opening speech by Sukarno at the Bandung 1955 conference. It came to my mind, when I read the very last page of Stuurmans work, where he states: ‘The global dissemination of a cross-cultural modern equality does not depend on the dissemination of a globally uniform culture, and still less on a global metaphysical consensus. Quite to the contrary; people can start from disparate ideas of common humanity, rooted in Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, or Enlightenment philosophy, and the list goes on.’ (p. 578) “Hold on” I thought when I read this, “Listen; I hear Sukarno”. So I would like to invite you to listen to him indeed, just for 2 minutes. The book, the constitutions, the speech -- they demonstrate that ideas have a history, but that time and again each time they have ‘to do it’ themselves. Thanks Siep that you collected them for us, with common humanity not just as the Archimedean point of the moral history of humanity, but also of our thoughts about just society today. That is how I would like to welcome the book. Hyperlink to Sukarno at Bandung 1955