

Interview

Prof. Rob Kroes
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aspeers: Good afternoon, Prof. Kroes. Let us begin with one question that probably all students of American studies have been confronted with by outsiders: “Why is it even important to do American studies?” What would your immediate reaction to that question be?

Kroes: Well, I would first say it’s a silly and stupid question. Just look back on your own life, and ask yourself the question: “Where would we, where would Europe have been without America?” America has played such an important role in structuring the lives and culture of Europeans—the strategic issues, safety and collective security, NATO and international relations. In fact, there are so few areas that you could study without paying attention to America. In all other cases, America looms large, and it surely is a snobby European question, as if America had no role to play, as if American culture was only low and vulgar, as if it was a country without history. In the first chapter of an earlier book on European perspectives on American mass culture, *If You’ve Seen One, You’ve seen the Mall*, I go over this repertoire of nosy European questions and hopefully make clear that there is so much more to America, its history and culture as well as the American role in European history than we are inclined to think.

aspeers: What is your personal approach to teaching American studies?

Kroes: One of my crucial interests in teaching American studies is to do it from a European point of view, and to explore the way that Europeans have integrated their imagined America into their lives and lifestyles. Another interest concerns the way that Americans imagine Europe and feel a relation to it, a sense of heritage, or a cultural connectedness. Both sides are crucial to exploring the idea of Atlanticism, which has



Late work or early rise?

Kroes: Late work.

Newspaper or website?

Kroes: Newspaper.

Poetry or prose?

Kroes: No preference, but I read more prose.

Book or journal?

Kroes: Both, there is no answer to this for me.

Rural or urban?

Kroes: Urban.

connected the two sides of the ocean for over two and a half centuries now. I also want to make European students aware of the fact that they all, even before their first course starts, have Americas in their minds—not very articulate, but perhaps informed by media, journalism and the news, films they see or music they listen to. But then it's definitely worth exploring the coherence of that inner image of America and what relevance it has for their daily lives, and for understanding the real America as it exists across the Atlantic.

aspeers: As already mentioned, your research focuses on US-American culture as well as its impact and perception in Europe. In your book *Them and Us* you talk about citizenship in its various forms. Of what do you consider yourself a citizen?

Kroes: Well, there is no single answer to that question. We should never forget that there are a number of layers of dormant affiliations inside of us which can be triggered depending on the situation you find yourself in. I give an example of that in the first pages of the book. Let's say, when the Dutch soccer team plays Germany, I feel fervently Dutch. But that is exceptional, and I am sitting there watching the game being surprised about myself that I feel so enthusiastically Dutch. There are very few moments in my life where I feel my Dutchness triggered by the situation. When I lead my daily life, I feel more meaningfully and continuously a member of an intellectual community of friends and scholars, some of whom happen to be Dutch, but others happen to be German, others are colleagues in the United States—a group of people that gives you a sense of 'us.'

There's one irony that I became aware of over the years. Traveling between universities in Europe, I see the same friends all over the continent and talk to them about America, but at various locations all over the European map we use one language that allows us to communicate no matter where we come from: English. It gives me a sort of proto-European sense and suddenly makes me aware of a life, probably in the future, where Europeans cross borders and without difficulty can have conversations with people on the other side of the border and where all of a sudden they then feel as Europeans. That is a continuing dream I have. A continental sense of ourselves, like in the United States, is only beginning to appear in Europe and only on occasion triggers us into shared enthusiasms or shared actions. And there is that interesting piece Jürgen Habermas wrote just before the Iraq invasion when so many people in Europe demonstrated against America and this American project. For him, this was a moment of European emancipation where they could begin to define themselves as Europeans, with their own view of the future and their own sense of history—separate and distinct from America.

aspeers: In *Them and Us*, you also mention an “emerging world culture” under US auspices. How do you personally experience this emerging world culture?

Kroes: There are so many signs and instruments of it. In the last chapter on the World Wide Web and the Internet, I explore the possibility of citizenship in cyberspace. And let's face it: The only way I can have this sense of community that I share with colleagues who live across the globe is to be on the Internet with them. We can write books together and organize conferences. It's a meaningful group of people, as if they live next door, that is then a sense of world citizenship that for me has to do with academic life. For women in the Middle East, for example, it's a parallel experience which has to do with talking to women in other countries and thus breaking out of the little imposed circle that keeps them inside their homes. They can't drive cars in Saudi Arabia, but they can talk to women in England and America. And you can come up with many other examples where the instrument of the Internet allows people to create their own virtual communities, virtual but very meaningful at the same time.

The whole Internet is an American technique, characteristically designed as an open-ended system. In my book *Them and Us*, I compare it to an earlier French example of using computer technology. That French system was called Minitel and it was connected to their telephone subscription and to their individual computers. But tellingly, Minitel ended at the French border. There is a clash between this kind of parochial French or even European nation-based view of the world, and a historically more open American culture. All European countries have this anti-immigration instinct and if there is an instinct in America, it is the other extreme. It is the same sort of openness that allowed them to invent the Internet.

aspeers: Since this issue of *aspeers* is devoted to aspects of migration and mobility: What is your favorite vacation spot?

Kroes: Well, I should of course say America... I love to go to America and I have been there very often indeed, for longer and shorter periods, sometimes as a tourist, sometimes as a scholar doing research or lecturing. But I also love to spend my vacations in Europe, and, of course, Europe is very much a central concern of mine.

aspeers: Did a vacation or travel experience ever create a certain research interest on your part?

Kroes: There is one clear case where I traveled in Montana, in the mountain west, and I found a small place there called Amsterdam, Montana. In fact, this was a settlement of Dutch immigrants, the first of whom had gone there in the 1890s. It fascinated me and I went back and did research on the place and wrote a book about it.

aspeers: And when you go on vacation, what do you read? Or, what are you reading right now?

Kroes: Of course I take books with me on vacation, mostly novels, novels and poetry, not so much scholarly stuff. Right now I am reading a novel by Pico Iyer, and it's called

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The Global Soul. It's about a man who loses every sense of being rooted in a place and becomes truly a global person. He loses part of his soul and rootedness in a place, but then comes to redefine himself as a man roaming across the world. It's a fascinating book.

aspeers: You have an educational background in sociology and political science. Considering these studies, how did you become an American studies scholar?

Kroes: By chance. I won an award, a fellowship, when I had graduated from the University of Amsterdam. This fellowship allowed me to go to any university in the US for two years. I chose to do further work in the social sciences, and I picked the University of Chicago which had that great name. I mean, the whole idea of the Chicago School of Sociology is still a sort of mythical historical reference. All I knew when I went to America was that I would go to Chicago—but then, there was this total immersion in American life, in American society. We traveled widely, and I was in my late twenties at the time, so you're open to new experiences, just married, a baby [laughs]. So a new cycle in life was opening up and America came at the right moment. It was in full turbulence and ferment in the late sixties: student revolts in Chicago and all over the country. That helped to get me hooked. When I came back to Amsterdam, there was an opening at the Institute for American Studies, and the man who was in charge of the Sociology department was also the Director of the American Studies department. He sensed my enthusiasm about this whole experience and he asked: "How about stepping sideways and joining American Studies?" And I said "YES" and never regretted that moment.

aspeers: Did you always want to be a professor?

Kroes: An academic, yes; professor, well that's not entirely in your own hands. But I always wanted to do academic work, research and write and teach students. I love to teach students and tell them about my research interest and concerns. The great moment always is when you see a light beginning to glow in their eyes and they start to share your interest and enthusiasm. And then there always was the tacit hope that if you keep working, in the end you will... It's an acknowledgement by colleagues that they then will appoint you to a chair, so I never considered saying "No" to the invitation.

aspeers: What is your favorite course to teach and why?

Kroes: There are several. For the last five or six years, I've always taught a master's course on the American-European relationship and about the relevance that America has gained, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. America played a crucial role in the early development of the idea of Europe as an entity transcending the nation. With the Marshall Plan and its diplomacy at the time, America crucially

helped and supported Europeans to get over their various nationalisms and that's still going on. Europe is in full development, has its ups and downs and is going through a relative down period right now. So, I use this particular course to also teach my students about their life as Europeans and maybe even to give them a few hints on how to become more European than they are. Another course I love to do, and actually teach right now, is connected to a book I wrote about photography and American history. Photography has been a longtime interest of mine, and I finally chose to do a book focusing on photography and how it helps us to remember history in general, but American history in particular. In my course I want to make students aware of the role media have played in educating us about the world and helping us to form our inner images of what the world looks like and what history looked like when it happened a hundred years ago.

aspeers: As a journal of graduate work, we would like to know what advice you would give current and prospective students of American studies concerning their studies or career choices.

Kroes: My advice would be to go as broadly as you can in the field of American studies. Simply range widely across the subject matter of America: Do history, literature, and urban studies, read novels, watch films, always asking yourself “What is American about it? And in what way is it different from how Europeans would do this?” My second advice would be to do as much extracurricular work as possible to widen your perspectives as much as you can: Take internships, or work for a newspaper or television, in order to move out of this strictly academic way of defining problems and solving them. And it's that combination, probably, that will help them to even become better scholars of America because they have looked at problems not only from an academic point of view, but also from within an organization or as a journalist. It is also good on your CV if you have those various moments where you step outside of the role of students.

aspeers: So would you rather recommend starting out in a single discipline?

Kroes: Ideally, yes. Do sociology, law, economics, or history first, where you truly get trained in the methods of research and how to use archives. But in the current university system there is no time to give students two or three years basic training in a discipline and then allow them to enter area studies. At Amsterdam and Utrecht, we try to pack as much introductory teaching, such as methodology, research questions, how to write a paper, into the first year—things you need when you do area studies, whether it is European studies or American studies. Range widely because the field of American studies implies that you also need to look outside. Although American studies programs cannot do it for the students, they can still advise and suggest it to them. If students have a burning interest in a particular subject area of American

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studies, you can then say: “Why not take a few support courses in the anthropology or urban studies department?”

aspeers: Would you have any book recommendations, especially in the field of American studies? Is there a book every American studies student should read?

Kroes: Oh well, there are so many good books. I just received *Diverse Nations* which was written by a famous American historian who died last year. His name is George Fredrickson, an expert in race relations history. And particularly now at such a historical moment with the Obama presidency beginning, I find it very useful to go back to the work of George Fredrickson and what he wrote about race, ethnic relations, and ethnic pluralism in America. He was also a master in doing comparative work. *Diverse Nations* explores racial and ethnic pluralism in a number of contemporary nations, including the United States. He was a fascinating man and did fascinating work!

aspeers: Many consider the Obama presidency as a new beginning. Where do you see European American studies in the future?

Kroes: It probably will go through ups and downs, depending on what happens on both sides of the Atlantic. With eight years of the Bush administration, there was a clear upsurge of anti-Americanism in Europe, a critique of America. In American studies circles the critique was probably even more articulate than in outside circles, because students of America know more about the country and are thus better able to interpret what happens now in light of what happened before. For example, American studies scholars and students in Europe are better able to connect the Bush administration to earlier periods, to interpret what it did in terms of American diplomacy or American religious life. And now with Obama, if you remember his visit to Berlin half a year ago, was it July or August...

aspeers: It was on July 24, some people from our group were there...

Kroes: Oh—good for you! And it’s so telling, this outpouring of enthusiasm for a man on the way to power, but still an interesting, promising individual. I think the presence of 200,000 people was a sign of relief among Europeans and in this case Germans, that the America that they like and affiliate with was not dead, was not gone and vanished forever, but that there was this new person who could revive European hopes and dreams. The history of European views of America is a history of ups and downs and we constantly have to recalibrate our views of America in light of history.

aspeers: What do you say then when scholars talk about the future, and consider the United States not so much in relation to Europe, but in relation to emerging powers, such as China?

Kroes: Well, as with everything in the future, it's very hard to predict. Undoubtedly, China is a rising economic giant, but so was Japan in the 1960s, and yet, we don't live in times that we would meaningfully describe as the Age of Japan or a Japanese Era. Japan had economic power and prosperity, and China probably will have it in the next twenty years or so, but it doesn't mean it will be such a dominant power across other fields such as culture, economics, and politics. It will be a very long time before China is politically a tempting country and even though it may be an intriguing culture, it is so far away from the European and American mold. In contrast, the appeal of American soft power led so many European countries to willingly follow the American example since the Marshall Plan, dreaming of things that Americans already had or, more generally, making the American dream their own dream for the future. It is that closeness and affinity between lifestyles and worldview that allowed America to be such a prominent country for so long and will probably keep it in that place for the next twenty or thirty-five years.

And then, of course, there has been a back and forth of cultural influence. For example, the best critics of jazz music live in Germany and France, and film studies in European universities teach Hollywood movies in addition to European movies. So, we have followed American culture closely, we are experts in it, particularly as scholars of American studies, but also public intellectuals in Europe have followed American culture closely. It's really a variation on a theme that we share and sometimes we think that it is intriguing because American culture is strange, and sometimes we like it because we see the closeness, the family relationship. It is all that and more that will keep America probably in a leading position across the field of economics, politics, and culture for the next decades.

aspeers: Thank you very much. We slowly have to wrap up, but we have one final question: What would you pick as the theme song for American studies?

Kroes: Oh yes, I have an idea: It is a music video by a Basque group, which is a sort of anti-American song, yet at the same time it is so typically American in its music. It is called *Big Benat*, you can look it up on YouTube. The Big Benat is the Basque equivalent to a Big Mac, and the refrain of the song is: "Long live Big Benat, two thumbs up, and then two thumbs down, down with Big Mac." As I said, it's sort of anti-American, but it's very witty and very entertaining. Also, it is very European in its critique of American culture while at the same time using American culture to make the song. You have to look it up so that students and readers can see it. So this would be my song: *Big Benat*.

aspeers: Prof. Kroes, thank you very much for the interview. It was a pleasure talking to you.

NOTES

Fermin Muguruza. *Big Benat*. 10 Jul. 2006. 10 Feb. 2009

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlh_E6ZO6b0>

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