I am from the class of 1999, when TI was still in the centre of the city of Amsterdam in an old building on the Keizersgracht.

Well do I remember the many nights spent with ‘kratjes pils’ and ‘borrelnoten’ as we were all struggling to finalise our PhD theses and be competitive in academia and elsewhere. It was hard work, but since it was also the ‘wild west’ days of an emerging Internet, when IT oversight was minimal, it was also an exciting period full of communal online games where groups of us would play ‘hartenjagen’ or compete in one of those first-person aeroplane-shooting games, among a host of other distractions available.

What has life been like for me after that, in terms of personal life? The usual set of things, really. My wife and I now have three kids, two of whom were already born before the end of my PhD days—which seems to me to be the best period to have kids, as one is flexible with time. We moved around a couple of times, from the UvA to the VU, and then to Melbourne, Canberra and now Brisbane, Australia. We now live in a great city in the tropics where life is safe, opulent and relaxed. I spend my weekends having barbeques and bike rides with friends and family. The grass is simply not greener anywhere else.

What about my intellectual life? Well, I basically have pitted myself against every major problem I could find, both physically and mentally. I was research director of a large study into the greatest human stampede ever, which is the move from the countryside to the city in China and Indonesia; I have tried to figure out the political economy of the economic growth we now see in India, and the lack of it in places like Somalia and Zimbabwe; I threw myself at the problem of the unexpected economic collapse in Eastern Europe after the breakdown of the communist trading block; I have tried my hand at building local research groups; I am currently looking at failing nation states; I have researched the causes of happiness, the reasons for the recent increase in mental health problems, the issue of economic growth take-offs, the Arab spring, the GFC, the optimal reaction to global warming, and so on.

My intellectual life is thus essentially spent trying to figure out the main drivers of individual and aggregate human behaviour, using major problems as sources of data, by which I don’t just mean the problems themselves, but also the whole circus of media, ‘concerned scientists and commentators’ and politics surrounding these problems. And I have used all of my TI training to do this, meaning that I run field experiments, do large-scale surveys, use Google trends alongside longitudinal panels, employ structural models when convenient and old-style OLS when it really doesn’t matter, construct simple game-theoretical models as well as large macro-models, engage in participatory observations (that is, I see and watch), and so forth. In terms of giving academics good skill-sets, I owe a debt of gratitude to the Dutch education system, in general, and to TI, in particular.

Oh, I have of course avidly played the publication game, a game that one must play and do well at in academia nowadays. That publication game is a necessary hurdle to get recognition and to pay the mortgage, but I have found it to be somewhat tangential to the much wider agenda I have found of truly trying to figure out what is going on in the world.

In terms of what I am most proud of so far, I can recommend you my main book summarising my current best-guess theories as to how you should read human behaviour: “An economic theory of Greed, Love, Groups and Networks”, which just came out in 2013 with Cambridge University Press. Although it’s not a quick read, I did have economic PhD students in mind as a key target audience—— so ‘you had bloody well better appreciate it!’ · And if you want to know what else I am up to, read my blogs at economics.com.au, or follow me on twitter (@FrijtersPaul).

The best of luck to all you PhD students and alumni! Do drop me a line if you are in the neighbourhood and I will put an extra steak on ‘the barbie’ for you!