

Reply to Gertjan Plets and Marin Kuijt¹

As curator of Rijksmuseum Boerhaave, I researched the history of energy in the Netherlands in the context of the exhibition entitled *Verborgen Krachten* (*Hidden Powers*) in 2011/2012 and the accompanying collection of essays *Verborgen Krachten: Nederlanders op zoek naar energie* (*Hidden Powers: the Dutch in search of energy*, 2011).² This research proved to be a veritable eye-opener for me. Whereas the Dutch regard themselves as inhabitants of a country defined by water and wind, windmills and sails, our history was actually largely marked by fossil fuels in a special way – ever since the sixteenth century, when the Dutch started to systematically extract peat as a fuel on a national scale. Based on a literature study, I claimed that the Netherlands must even have been the first fossil fuel-based economy in the world.

By focusing on the entwinement of the Netherlands with fossil fuels, which was eventually continued by the Koninklijke Olie/Shell company and the natural gas production at Slochteren, I aimed to expand existing historiography in the hope that historians would delve deeper into this matter, whether by agreeing with this entanglement, by qualifying it, or by criticising it, based on substantive arguments. That is how historiography progresses.

Now, ten years later, there is a reaction in the form of Gertjan Plets and Marin Kuijt's article, but unfortunately, it is not one that addresses the actual content of my work for Museum Boerhaave in 2011/2012, but one that doubts the integrity of my intentions. Their critique boils down to the suggestion that, as a staff member of Rijksmuseum Boerhaave, I have presented a favourable view of fossil fuels because I would have been influenced by the Shell company, which sponsored the exhibition *Verborgen Krachten* (pp. 10-13). In science, calling into question a researcher's independence is regarded as a serious accusation, which should require a robust underpinning. Yet, I detect six problematic aspects in the authors' argumentation.

The first is their use of sources. The authors diligently report that their analysis is based on a 'close reading' of exhibitions, interviews and analyses of exhibition-related documents (p. 1). However, for their analysis of *Verborgen Krachten* they never spoke to any of the people involved³ and consulted none

of the exhibition documents, and there is nothing in their article to indicate they have even seen the exhibition. Their analysis of *Verborgen Krachten* appears to rest almost entirely on one single source: the aforementioned booklet *Verborgen Krachten: Nederlanders op zoek naar energie*.⁴ The authors apparently assume that this booklet is a direct representation of the exhibition. That is curious, as it is no more than a collection of essays compiled by Tiemen Cocquyt and me about various topics from the Dutch energy history.⁵ Based on their flawed source analysis, Plets and Kuijt create a lopsided image of the exhibition. For instance, they fail to mention that the protests in the 1970s and 1980s against nuclear energy *and* companies like Shell were extensively highlighted in a separate pavilion.⁶

By garbling quotations and paraphrases – and this is a second problem – the authors arrive at the conclusion that ‘the exhibition discursively connected fossil fuels to Dutch citizenship or “Nederlanderschap”’ (p. 11).

- 1 This reply is based on the ‘online first’-version of the article ‘Gas, Oil and Heritage: Well-oiled Histories and Corporate Sponsorship in Dutch Museums (1990-2021)’, *BMGN – Low Countries Review* (Online first 2021) 1-28 by Plets and Kuijt, published in September 2021. The page numbers and footnotes mentioned in this reply therefore refer to the online first article. You can find this version here, <https://bmg-nlchr.nl/article/view/7028/online-first>. An amended version of Plets and Kuijt’s article was published in March 2022, both online and in print, doi: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmg-nlchr.7028>.
- 2 In this project I collaborated with my colleague at Rijksmuseum Boerhaave, Tiemen Cocquyt, who was also co-editor of the booklet *Verborgen Krachten*. Since I was responsible for the historical part of this project, I am writing this reply. Plets and Kuijt’s paragraphs dedicated to *Verborgen Krachten* (pp. 10-15) especially refer to the introduction of the booklet and three short essays written by me entitled ‘Schop in eigen bodem’ (‘To dig one’s own ground’). See Tiemen Cocquyt and Ad Maas (eds.), *Verborgen krachten: Nederlanders op zoek naar energie* (Hilversum 2011).
- 3 A note to this: in my inbox I found a message by Gertjan Plets, dating from 21 May 2019, requesting an interview about ‘changing funding structures in the Dutch museum world’. As a curator, I am obviously not involved in such matters, so I asked a colleague with expertise in funding to answer this question. Plets’ e-mail contained no reference to *Verborgen Krachten* nor to any other exhibition-related topics.
- 4 Moreover, the authors link one statement erroneously to the *Verborgen Krachten* booklet, while it is derived from a newspaper interview that they ultimately mention in note 34. In note 28 they also refer to a radio interview. More on this below.
- 5 The booklet was published as part of the exhibition, but it was not a catalogue providing a survey of the content of the exhibition. For the compilation, we invited academics and journalists to reflect on topics of their own interest related to Dutch energy history. The contributions written by Cocquyt and myself in the volume only partly overlapped with the conclusion of the exhibition.
- 6 The *Verborgen Krachten* exhibition consisted of six pavilions covering the entire history of energy in the Netherlands. Two were dedicated to fossil fuels (one on peat and one on coal, oil and gas). The other four concerned the origin of the scientific concept of energy, nuclear energy, the protest movement of the 1970s and 1980s and the contemporary search for alternative energy sources.

I started the booklet with a plea for greater interest in Dutch energy history, as it has had a great impact on Dutch national history and landscape (quarrying, gas-heated greenhouses, windmills, etc.). My claim was that there had been relatively little interest in this subject in the existing literature and I continued as follows:

The struggle against the water is seen as the quintessence of Dutchness, while the feverish search for energy is in no way represented in our self-image. Nevertheless, it does have typically Dutch characteristics, as will be shown by the stories presented in this book. (*Verborgene Krachten*, p. 7, and not p. 8 as the authors erroneously report, AM)

The authors represent this quote as follows in their article on page 11:

(...) [T]he exhibition [meaning the booklet, AM] discursively connected fossil fuels to Dutch citizenship or 'Nederlanderschap' (*Verborgene Krachten*, p. 8). Throughout, the exhibition's narrative perpetuates the image that searching for energy and fossil fuels is an intrinsic part of the Dutch national identity: a 'typical Dutch characteristic' (*Verborgene Krachten*, p. 8).

It is particularly the authors' insertion of 'fossil fuels' at strategic places which misrepresents the content.

The third shortcoming is presentism. Whereas 2011 is only eleven years ago, views on fossil fuels have changed considerably since then, especially in recent years. In 2011, hardly anybody was surprised by the neutral tone of the exhibition, in which the nature of the topic inherently meant that Shell received a prominent position. The exhibition was actually opened by the eco-conscious Diederik Samsom of the social-democratic party PvdA. The view expressed in the exhibition that the Netherlands would be relying on fossil fuels for decades to come was one that was widely shared. Plets and Kuijt implicitly apply today's standards to support their suggestion that our story was influenced by Shell.

The fourth problematic aspect is that their entire argumentation is based on *hineininterpretieren*: a biased reading of the texts.⁷ Their method of 'close reading' apparently gives them the right to make assertions ('Reading between the lines of the exhibition, however, we find that' ... etc.) without further substantiation. At the same time, nowhere in their argumentation is there any direct evidence for their key observation.

7 One example concerns the authors' quotation of the exhibition's concluding message (i.e. the booklet's, but in this case they do correspond) stating that geographic conditions make it difficult for the Netherlands to dispense with

fossil fuels. Although this statement is almost a truism (and this was definitely the case in 2011), the authors use it as evidence for the influence of Shell.

The fifth problem is the authors' selective use of historiography, which interestingly is precisely one of the accusations the authors level at the museums under discussion and at their staff in the publicity for their article.⁸ Yet, in the radio interview from 2011 mentioned in note 28, I extensively answered (starting at 15:25) the interviewer's question about the development and content of the exhibition and the relationship with the sponsor: crucial information that relates to the core of Plets and Kuijt's research.⁹ While the authors of course could have used arguments to criticise my assertions – one of which is that Shell had no influence on our story – they opted to mention the interview in a footnote while completely ignoring its content. And finally, the authors have decided not to give us the chance to present our side of the story.

The aim of my reply does not concern the authors' general research question, nor have I wanted to discuss the more policy-related aspects their article addresses, as this is beyond my expertise. I have replied in my capacity as a professional historian.

I invite the authors to reconsider their argumentation as it insufficiently substantiates their assertion that I have presented a biased view of Dutch energy history in *Verborgen Krachten*, under the direct or indirect influence of the sponsor. I also invite readers with an interest in scientific methods and research integrity to form their own judgement. With the publisher's consent, I have made the original booklet *Verborgen Krachten* available on my Academia.edu page.¹⁰

In the meanwhile, more serious attention to Dutch energy history remains more than welcome.

Ad Maas

8 See: 'Besmeurd verleden: De fossiele industrie schetst een zo positief mogelijk beeld van zichzelf in musea', *Utrecht University*, 13 September 2021, <https://www.uu.nl/nieuws/besmeurd-verleden-de-fossiele-industrie-schetst-een-zo-positief-mogelijk-beeld-van-zichzelf-in-musea>; 'Historici: Shell beïnvloedt tentoonstellingen Nederlandse musea', *NPO Radio 1*, 19 September 2021, [\[podcast/59379/historici-shell-beinvloedt-tentoonstellingen-nederlandse-musea\]\(https://www.nporadio1.nl/podcasts/ovt-fragmenten-podcast/59379/historici-shell-beinvloedt-tentoonstellingen-nederlandse-musea\).](https://www.nporadio1.nl/podcasts/ovt-fragmenten-</p>
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9 Botte Jellema, 'Verborgen krachten', *VPRO*, 6 October 2011, https://www.vpro.nl/speel-POMS_VPRO_196671-verborgen-krachten-.html, accessed on 30 October 2021.

10 https://www.academia.edu/63338601/Verborgen_Krachten_Nederlanders_op_zoek_naar_energie?sm=b.