

Reply to Ad Maas¹

Let's start with underlining that we were surprised to read Ad Maas' list of complaints. Judging from the message, Maas clearly depicts our article as a work of sloppy history. Among the ills he diagnoses are a lack of sources, misleading quotations, presentism, and *hineininterpretieren*. If Maas' reading of the article is correct, our work could figure as an example of how not to do history in a lecture for first-year students.

Firstly, we have indeed not interviewed Maas for our study after Rijksmuseum Boerhaave refused to talk to us about their funding structure. Maas, however, mischaracterises our conversation in his reply. The communication started with a short email, which was followed by a twenty-minute telephone conversation with one of the managers at the museum (footnote 13 in article). We did not pursue further contact because the nature of the conversation was not constructive and it was clear there was no interest in collaboration. Furthermore, the Boerhaave exhibitions were only two of the many examples in our study and we already collected sufficient information.

We also have to disappoint our colleague when it comes to his claims about sources. Contrary to what Maas states, we drew on a wide range of sources – all of them relevant to the exhibition. Maas indicates that the *Verborgen Krachten* book is irrelevant to the exhibition. This is hard to believe, given that the book was presented at the opening of the exhibition which carried the exact same name as the book. Furthermore, the reviews and visitor reports from the exhibition we studied confirmed that the content of the book resembles the exhibition.

In the article we write that the catalogue explicitly questioned the efficiency of wind, sun and tidal energy projects (p. 11). Maas might think of this as a case of a biased reading of the text lacking substantiation. Luckily, we in fact had a suite of sources at our disposal to reconstruct the discourse in the exhibition. We used an interview on public radio (footnote 28) with the makers of the exhibition, which further confirmed that an overly positive hydrocarbon discourse stood central in the exhibition. Furthermore, we also used visitor reviews to study the reception of the exhibition. A review in the *Reformatorsch Dagblad* (footnote 34) echoed our concerns. Another visitor report, which we did not include in our article, came to the same conclusion as we did: 'The picture painted by the exhibition of the future of energy is,

unfortunately, not sustainable’.² The visitor continues with a quote from the exhibition: ‘Renewable energy has of yet no future’. He concludes with this remark: ‘That is what I would say if I were Shell’.

Our sources also tell us that in 2012 there were already people that were conscious of the unholy trinity of fossil-fuel extraction, pollution and environmental change. Clearly, this is not a case of presentism. In the article we cite a study that demonstrates that right around the time of the exhibition a fierce debate on fracking played itself out in the Dutch public sphere (footnote 33). Also, the earthquakes in Groningen already caused upheaval in civil society. Movies, documentaries and popular books had by then also started to change public opinion about gas and the carbon-driven economy. *An Inconvenient Truth* by Al Gore had already in 2006 publicly connected global warming to fossil fuels. In 2010 the famous documentary *Gasland*, produced by Josh Fox and HBO, had specifically brought issues around fracking and gas into the limelight. So, in 2011 fossil-fuel extraction was already a contested issue in the Netherlands and beyond. The energy sector was well aware of the backlash against extraction which is why they felt the need to push for ‘energy literacy’ and allocated money for partnerships with museums (footnote 68).

This leaves us with the accusation of *Hineininterpretierung*. As indicated earlier, we are not the only ones who were left with similar impressions after reading up on the exhibition. Furthermore, Maas suggests we have cherry-picked lines from a few sources to squeeze them in our hypothesis. Because the *Verborgen Krachten* exhibition was only one of many examples in our study, we did not include all sources in the article. Moreover, since the article has the ambition to criticise practices and policy frameworks, we did not include quotes or information directly tied to individuals. Our article is not about Maas or Boerhaave, it is about corporate funding. That is why we did not discuss a poignant op-ed written by Maas in 2012 titled ‘The Netherlands = fossil fuel country’. In the op-ed in *NRC*, Maas reacted to a decision of the courts to block fracking operations in Brabant.³ Maas argued that it is ‘unwise’ to stop the search for shale gas: ‘We should not obstruct

1 The page numbers and footnotes mentioned in this reply refer to 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. You can find this version here, <https://bmgn-lchr.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/bmgn-lchr.7028>.

2 ‘Nederland is een land van fossiele brandstoffen’, *Duurzame student*, 14 January 2012, <https://www.duurzamestudent.nl/2012/01/14/nederland-is-een-land-van-fossiele-brandstoffen/>, accessed 15 November 2021.

3 Ad Maas, ‘Nederland = fossielebrandstofland’, *NRC*, 14 January 2012, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2012/01/14/nederland-fossielebrandstofland-12151890-a1135753>, accessed 15 November 2021.

the search for fossil fuels (...) We will need them dearly in the future'. Maas' op-ed indicates he knew perfectly well that extraction needed defending in 2011/2012 and directly undermines his argument that he could not have known that gas and oil are prone to criticism. Moreover, the article relays a pro-carbon discourse that is so outspoken that it is almost impossible to come with a different interpretation.

Even if it would be true that Dutch research in the early 2010s depicted gas and oil as imperative for the economic development of the Netherlands, one would expect that one at least looks at the international literature for a comparative perspective. In 1977, *The Economist* already coined the term 'Dutch Disease' to describe economies whose competitiveness decreased due to a dependency on gas and oil incomes.⁴ The concept has not only been expanded by economists like Max Corden⁵, importantly, the problems around the Slochteren gas field have also been used to theorise the political and economic problems in oil-producing countries like Nigeria, Venezuela and Russia.⁶ Engaging with international literature is important and this could have made Maas attentive to his blind spots.

What we perhaps find most problematic about Maas' answer is his comment that he is just a professional historian and the other points we make in our paper are beyond his competence. We expect more from our public museums. We believe that public museums should always serve those who fund it – the taxpayers. These taxpayers include the people from Groningen and Drenthe. They have been suffering for more than two decades from the greedy extraction of hydrocarbons. The discourse in Maas' response and exhibition shows little attention for their voices. Activists like Meent van der Sluis (1944-2000) brought these issues to the forefront over three decades ago. He, amongst others, has been banalised throughout his entire life in popular media and public opinion. However, taxpayers expect that a public museum – conceived as a centre of expertise – does not *reproduce* public opinion but *critically engages* with dominant ideas through research.

We welcome Maas and Rijksmuseum Boerhaave to transfer all e-mails or fax conversations between the curators, exhibition firm, sponsors and other stakeholders, including the sponsor contract and minutes from meetings with the aforementioned protagonists, to a public archive. The Drents Museum has

4 'The Dutch Disease', *The Economist*, 26 November 1977, 82-83.

5 Max Corden, 'Booming Sector and Dutch Disease Economics: Survey and Consolidation', *Oxford Economic Papers* 36:3 (1984) 359-380.

6 Fidel Ezeala-Harrison, 'Structural Re-Adjustment in Nigeria: Diagnosis of a Severe Dutch Disease Syndrome', *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 52:2 (1993) 193-208. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1536-7150.1993.tb02533.x>;

Vladimir Gel'man and Otar Marganiya (eds.), *Resource Curse and Post-Soviet Eurasia: Oil, Gas, and Modernization* (New York 2010); Mohsen Fardmanesh, 'Dutch disease economics and oil syndrome: An empirical study', *World Development* 19:6 (1991) 711-717. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(91\)90205-V](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(91)90205-V).

done this, also in Germany this is standard practice. We would gladly replicate our research and if we would come to a conflicting interpretation we will be the first to acknowledge our mistakes.

Marin Kuijt
Gertjan Plets