

# 'Historians don't have any ideas of their own'

## In gesprek met Keith Thomas

*Peer Vries*

Sir Keith Thomas is thans president van het prestigieuze Corpus Christi College te Oxford. Hij is vooral beroemd geworden als auteur van *Religion and the decline of magic. Studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England* (Londen 1971) en *Man and the natural world. Changing attitudes in England 1500-1800* (Londen 1983). Daarnaast schreef hij talloze artikelen, onder andere in *Past and Present*. Zoals uit de genoemde boeken al blijkt, gaat zijn aandacht vooral uit naar de cultuurgeschiedenis van Engeland in de vroeg-moderne tijd. Hoewel hij zelf waarschijnlijk niet erg gelukkig is met de aanduiding 'cultuurhistoricus', geldt hij als één van de bekendste beoefenaren van de cultuurgeschiedenis. Om die reden was hij uitgenodigd als gastspreker op het grote congres *Balans en perspectief van de Nederlandse cultuurgeschiedenis* dat op 18 en 19 oktober 1989 in Utrecht werd gehouden. Zijn verblijf in ons land viel samen met het op de markt verschijnen van het boek *De ondergang van de magische wereld. Godsdiens en magie in Engeland, 1500-1700* (Amsterdam 1989), de Nederlandse vertaling van zijn boek uit 1971. Aangezien in diverse interviews al uitvoerig aandacht is geschonken aan de inhoud van dit boek, zal het in het hier afgedrukte gesprek tussen hem en Peer Vries slechts terloops aan de orde komen. Gezien de ware hausse die de cultuurgeschiedenis thans doormaakt, leek het zinvoller om een zo beroemd exponent van deze nieuwste mode binnen de geschiedbeoefening te vragen naar zijn visie op geschiedenis in het algemeen en cultuurgeschiedenis in het bijzonder.

**'In your lecture you used the word ethnography to describe the work you and many other historians are doing at the moment.<sup>1</sup> Why didn't you use the word ethnology or historical anthropology? Is it just a matter of words or do you think one cannot find any "logic" or "anthropologic" in history?**

I suppose I use the term ethnography because I am really thinking of the tradition of British ethnography which is perhaps more concerned

with recording the facts than with interpretation. I think that most interpretations are ephemeral. There is a sense in which the most ambitious modern anthropological works are for a time very fashionable and then discarded whereas the ethnographical material compiled by missionaries, travellers or colonial civil servants, people without any great intellectual pretension, often remains of more enduring value. But I would not attach great significance to the term. I simply mean that I am really concerned to bring to light dimensions of the past which historians traditionally have tended to be indifferent to.

**But do you think one could possibly find a kind of logic, a kind of system in the ethnographic material? What for example do you think of the approach of Lévi-Strauss?<sup>2</sup> Is it suitable for historians or not?**

Well, I think that a lot of modern anthropology is what I would regard as over-intellectualized, certainly, and I think that reducing things to algebra is not my object. My object is to translate the experience of the past into a language which perfectly ordinary people in the present will understand.

**So you share the ideas of Clifford Geertz about "higher cryptology"?**

What do you have in mind?

**In an article he wrote he uses the expression "higher cryptology" to describe the work of Lévi-Strauss.<sup>3</sup>**

Well, yes, I am afraid I do. I think - I must be careful - the French are more intellectually ambitious in this area. I do not mean to say there is an easy distinction to be made between facts and interpretation. I admit that merely recognizing something as a fact is to imply an interpretation. Nevertheless, in a common-sensical way, recovering the data of the past seems to me the primary objective and one can philosophize about them forever thereafter. I think it is the fieldwork rather than the armchair-anthropology that is important.

**What struck me in your lecture is that you never mentioned the names of some scholars who are very popular and influential on the continent. I mean Norbert Elias, Max Weber and Michel Foucault. Is this because they do not influence your current work?<sup>4</sup>**

Well I would not base too much on the lecture. I was only allowed forty-five minutes and I was told that I had to speak by my standards very slowly. So I had to cut out a good deal of what I was

going to say. Let's take them in order. I reviewed the first translation of Elias's work, when it came out in English after all those years, for the *New York Review of Books*, so I am quite familiar with it.<sup>5</sup> I don't regard him as an historian.

**What do you mean by that? You don't regard him as a historian. He is very influential among historians.**

I agree, but he is one stage removed from historical sources. I think he has been a very stimulating thinker but he writes as a sociologist and is concerned to make sense of data which historians perhaps have compiled. I don't think he has ever been in an historical archive.

**Do you mean to say that ideas like "civilization process" or "Entzauberung der Welt" are very "tricky" ideas for historians?**

On the contrary, I think that historians are totally parasitic for their ideas upon other disciplines and upon the thinking of not just sociologists but psychologists, economists, philosophers. Historians don't have any ideas of their own. They on the whole tend to employ what they think of as common sense, which is really a debased version of the economics, philosophy or sociology of a generation or two ago.

**A very dangerous question. You say historians don't have any ideas of their own. Which are your ideas? Who are the people who influenced you?**

Well, I am very eclectic and seldom read a book without getting some thoughts out of it. I certainly read all the people you mentioned, although Foucault I find least interesting. Weber on the contrary is a person of the greatest intellectual power. He seems to me of a totally different order from the other two you mentioned, totally different.

**I quite agree, but not everybody does. I asked this question because when one talks about ethnography, about seeing a time in its own values and in its own terms isn't there a danger that one does not see any continuity or any trend and that history disintegrates to become just one fact after another. You must, at least to my opinion, see some kind of trend, some kind of direction in what you are studying.**

**You are suggesting the whole of history is moving in a single direction?**

**No, not the whole of history. But when you are studying a specific period, let's say early modern Europe or the Industrial Revolution, I think it is hardly possible to get a coherent view of it, when you are not convinced there is any coherence in it. Don't you see a kind of general development in history as a process of "civilization" or "Entzauberung der Welt"? Do you think there is no direction at all in history, not even in early modern Europe?**

No clearly, I don't think that. I don't think I know all the answers. I think that one's views on the subject are changing all the time with more experience. I suppose I started off a long time ago with, what you might call, a sort of debased Marxist view which regards economic changes as the motor. I still think they are pretty important, but I don't take that view any longer. Anyway, how are historians supposed to arrive at these general views? Are they supposed to already know all this before they study the particular period? Do you think historians need to have a totally coherent philosophy of history before they start their research?

**No, I don't want to imply that historians should have a totally coherent philosophy of all of history, but if as everybody says it is very important for cultural historians to see a totality, then they must have an idea about how the whole coheres.**

You have to have a view of how the whole coheres certainly, but I don't think I have a coherent view. I think the difficult question is the relationship between material developments on the one hand and mental ones on the other. I confess to be in a state of some internal uncertainty on this point in that there are times when I find it difficult to conceive of any material fact, because it is only our mind which teaches us to recognize material facts. At the same time I can see that human beings are animals and that they do need food and shelter and so forth. But their conceptions of what constitutes food and shelter seem to me culturally relative. I think even the structure of society is to a great extent in the mind.

**But don't you even see a certain distinctiveness in the early modern period? If there would be no coherence or assumed coherence, what makes it a period?**

Well, of course I studied primarily with reference to England and I am not sure I would claim any outstanding coherence for it. I just started there. But the more I think about it, the more do I think that the fourteenth and certainly the fifteenth century should be part

of it. I think there is a great change in the eighteenth century which I suppose in the end is the Industrial Revolution. It is a period bounded for me by the Reformation on the one hand and the Industrial Revolution on the other. It is the period which sees the beginning of the printed book and the growth in literacy. It sees relationships with an altogether wider world, with other continents. I would not make any great claims for its unity. It is like when you say that you know a particular person well. You cannot be sure that person is so special and distinctive from other people. It just happens to be a person you know.

**There is a discussion between Lawrence Stone and Alan Macfarlane about the nature of English society in the early modern period. What is your position in this discussion?**

You call it a discussion, but it is only a review by Lawrence Stone of one of Alan Macfarlane's books.<sup>6</sup>

**You are right, but I think it is an indication of a great difference of opinion.**

Alan Macfarlane, in my view, is correct to draw attention to some features of the Middle Ages as being rather like features of a later period as for example a market in land and a good deal of disposibility of property. On the other hand I think he rather overlooked features of the later Middle Ages, like for example serfdom, which distinguish it from later periods. I am afraid as always there is a bit of truth on both sides.

**But what is the reason then that there are so many so-called cultural historians who are studying this particular period?**

There are historical reasons for that. Initially it was thought to be a very decisive period. In the Marxist framework it was the period of the so-called English Revolution, the first bourgeois revolution. That is what made this period important. And a lot of people who studied this period were initially attracted to it for that reason. Having got there they just go on. Life is not as simple as you are implying. You are implying that people first of all work out their whole philosophy of history, they then decide what are the important periods in history and then they start to study them. It does not work like that. You just start and then think about all these things as you go along.

**I am not really implying that. It just strikes me that so many "cul-**

**tural" historians study the early modern period instead of the "really" modern period.**

There are far more historians today studying the world since 1800 or even since 1850 than the rest of human history altogether. The difference is that the study of the very modern world is on the whole much more conventional - political, social and economic in a traditional way - than the study of earlier periods. It raises the question: "Why have anthropological or cultural approaches been more influential in the study of earlier periods than they are in the study of modern periods?"

**Do you think they could be as influential or do you think modern mass society should be studied in another way?**

I think there would have to be a very much stronger statistical element in it, but essentially I think people find it much harder to recognize the strangeness of very recent times than the strangeness of remote times. They don't see the need for an anthropological approach to the study of the nineteen-thirties.

**It seems to me that the word "strangeness" is a central one in your work.**

Yes, but let me explain. I don't mean the past remains strange. I mean you must start with the assumption that it is all strange and it has all got to be worked out. But when you have worked it out, you will find a good deal of it is familiar. But you should not start with the preconception that it is all familiar.

**In almost all the lectures, articles or books about cultural history, historians are emphasizing that cultural history implies "breaking bread with the dead", trying to identify yourself with the people you are studying, trying to see the world as they did. Isn't there a danger that this kind of history becomes rather "one-sided", that historians lose sight of the structural conditions in which people have to live and the structures they create by doing things?**

I think there are two ways of studying the past and they are both necessary. Anthropologists call these approaches the "emic" and the "etic" approach. In the one you try to study everything from the point of view of the native or the inhabitant. That's an approach which has not been very common until recently because on the whole historians have been fairly patronizing in their attitude to the past,

so I entirely applaud the attempt to reconstruct past meanings from the point of view of actors at the time. That's the "emic" approach. On the other hand we have the advantage of hindsight and of being able to take a broader view and of being able to see many features of past societies which contemporaries could not see. For example, we can see that sixteenth-century England was a society in which population was growing very rapidly and where pressure on means of subsistence was getting more acute. Nobody in the sixteenth century knew for certain that the population was growing, some people thought it was declining. They had no idea. They certainly did not know what size it was. Nobody in the Middle Ages thought they were living in the Middle Ages. So we need both approaches. But I think we can rely on the second, on the "etic" approach, the comparative approach, the hindsight, the putting in perspective. That I think we can take for granted. What we can not take for granted is a genuine attempt to do the first, to look at actions from the actors point of view.

**But aren't you afraid that the actor-oriented approach can be "overdone"?**

Well, how can you overdo it? How do you mean?

**Well, at the moment many historians are so keen on studying the native's point of view - as you said yourself when you were referring to Clifford Geertz - that they, at least in my view, no longer pay enough attention to the more material and structural aspects of life.**

Oh yes, certainly. I think for example we could get to work on some remote country-village and study life from the peasant's point of view, which is not easy by the way. But we must recognize that the peasant's economy was part of a larger, national or even international economy and dependent on general price-movements of which he was totally unaware. His fortunes were really being determined by circumstances totally outside his control in some ways of which he knew nothing, but of which we, as historians, know quite a bit. And that is important. I do not think that the actor-oriented approach should exclude other approaches. I am afraid I am very pluralist and eclectic.

I am not a one-eyed man. The one-eyed man sees furthest as you know. And on the whole, the one-eyed people become the famous historians who have a distinctive view. They have one, absolutely obsessive view. Norbert Elias is a case like that. Such an approach, of course, is very fertile. But on the other hand you say immediately:

"Well, there is rather more to it than that". And then you see a lot of other things. I naturally tend to see other points of view.

**I think it is a real danger. When I read books of for example Clifford Geertz and especially his theoretical articles, I am afraid anthropology, especially the so-called "interpretive anthropology" could become too one-sided.<sup>7</sup>**

Well, I quite agree with that. It just depends on what you think history is really. I noticed it seems to be quite common in the Netherlands to refer to history as a science. It's a term we, in England, never use at all.

**What's the term you are using in England?**

Well, it's one of the humanities or one of the arts subjects. The idea that you would achieve the same precision in history that you might in physics would be absurd. I regard history as an art of representation. I think a historian is like a very disciplined landscape-painter and I do not think there is a sense in which a landscape of Cezanne supersedes a landscape of Constable. They are both perfectly valid landscapes.

**But is it not the absolute ideal of cultural history or anthropology to give a "total reconstruction"? Do you agree that the best thing a historian could do would be to give a "total" reconstruction in which the actor-oriented approach and the more structural approach are integrated?**

Well, he would have to write different chapters. In a sense it is not different from ordinary human experience. We could write an account of our meeting now which is totally actor-oriented and discuss your attempts to get something out of me and my trying to think of something to say quickly in answer to your questions. That would be totally actor-oriented. But we could also step back and discuss the phenomenon of why there are journals and the institution of interviews and so on. We then do not need to bother about our point of view at all. We are both part of a larger system. They are both valid.

**What are the implications of your opinion that history is not a science? Does it mean that you think there is no such thing as a "historical method"?**

I do not think there is a unique historical method. And that is be-



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cause there is no form of explanation which is distinctive to history. There is no form of argument or reasoning which is distinctively historical.

**What is then your opinion about Carlo Ginzburg's "conjectural" approach? He thinks cultural historians can use a distinctive approach in which small details can give them a "privileged entry" to answering large questions.<sup>8</sup>**

Well, but as he says, in a way that is no different from the way police-detectives work. It is not an approach distinctive to historians.

**But at least it would set historians apart from people who practise science, whether it is social or natural science.**

Oh, I see. Well, as I was saying, in my opinion history is more like ordinary life. I mean if you meet a stranger you generalize probably far too quickly on the basis of superficial things, like peoples' dress or whatever, things which may be totally untypical or unrepresentative of how they normally dress.

**I read your books 'Religion and the decline of magic' and 'Man and the natural world' and I was impressed by the very wide reading on which they are based. How do you find all these sources? Do you have a systematic approach or are you just reading book after book and so on?**

My approach is not terribly systematic. It is not totally unsystematic either. I spend far more time reading literature of the period than recent literature. But when after reading in a rather random way I really go into any particular topic I try to read rather exhaustively and systematically. I claim to have read every work anybody had ever written on the subject of witchcraft in seventeenth-century England when I wrote about it. I tried to read every contemporary pamphlet on the subject and I went to all the church court records and to all the judicial records.

**And what exactly did you learn by reading books written by anthropologists?**

Well I suppose they gave me a stimulus. First of all let me say that the anthropology books I read mostly, but not all, were British social anthropology books and most of them were primarily functionalist in their approach. It was during the sixties that I did the actual reading

for my book on religion and the decline of magic and the books that were on the shelf then were written in the fifties, forties and even thirties. And I suppose that encouraged me to give a rather more functionalist set of explanations in that book than I might do now if I were to do it again. It was even before structuralism. More generally I suppose I found analogies very stimulating. To mention a particular point, one of the most central arguments in that book relates to the circumstances in which a witchcraft accusation was likely to be made. And I suggest that such an accusation was most likely to be made when, for example, some woman would come to the door, ask to borrow some food or drink or household utensil, be turned away and then something goes wrong with the household for which the witch is then blamed. Well I only considered that question because there had been heavy emphasis in the anthropological writing about African witchcraft on the importance of studying the relationship which previously existed between the witch and her accuser. Now that relationship was not the same as the one I described at all. But I think it would never have occurred to me to ask what was the previous relationship between the witch and the accuser if I had not seen that done in an other context.

**So it is a kind of eye-opener?**

As I already said, historians are absolutely parasitic upon other disciplines for all their ideas. If you only read history books you will never get any ideas.

**That would be a nice title for this interview. Can you tell something about the projects you are working on at this moment? Where do you go from here? Is there some direction in which you are going?**

Well I am not sure. You are asking in what direction I am going. I am just like an anthropologist and just as an anthropologist does his fieldwork (or used to do so because it does not happen that much nowadays) in some African society to study every dimension of that society, similarly I suppose I have got so much "ethnographical" material relating to my period that there are many other dimensions of this period which I want to write up. I happen at the moment to be particularly interested in social differences manifested in different ways of dressing, speaking, moving and behaving, in different types of manners, different forms of social intercourse, different attitudes to possessions, different types of possessions, different tastes. You know the work by Pierre Bourdieu? His kind of preoccupations happen to be mine, only for a much earlier period.<sup>9</sup> So that is the general

area. But really, I suffer from a butterfly mind, doing too many different things.

**In your lecture you were rather optimistic about the future of cultural history although you did not see any need for institutionalizing it as a discipline.**

Well I just think that it is a matter of fact really. The preoccupations of historians keep changing. They seem to me to have changed in this direction in a way that is here to stay. As to institutionalization, I do not believe it is any good having a few chairs of cultural history. I think it is wrong because that only "ghettoizes" the subject. It just segments it off from the main business of history. I am concerned with what historians in general should be doing, not with what a little group of "cultural" historians should be doing.

**You think it could even be dangerous to try and make it a kind of "super history"? There is a tendency among cultural historians to say there are political historians, social historians, economic historians etcetera and that they all only study a part of the past. Over and above them there is a kind of superhistorians, "cultural historians" who study "totality".**

Who has written this super history? What sort of thing do you have in mind?

**I do not mean to say somebody already wrote this kind of history. It is an ideal.**

Well I might say at the moment somebody is doing it. David Hackett Fischer is certainly getting very near to it in his work on American culture.<sup>10</sup> I have just seen the first volume of it which is a huge book and it is one of five. That is going to be a super history and I applaud that. As I was saying I am a pluralist. I do not want to stop anybody doing anything he wants. I think one needs specialists, particularly in subjects like economic history. That is not for the amateur at all. At the same time you also need people who are able to construct a synthesis.

**When you look at the papers presented at this conference I think there undoubtedly is a certain danger of disintegration threatening cultural history.**

Yes, that is what I tried to suggest in my lecture. You just think of any other subject...

**... and you call it "cultural".**

Yes. By the way, I was quite serious about this term cultural history not being an English one other than in the "high culture" sense. How long has it been "en vogue" in the Netherlands?

**I think for about ten years. Of course we had Huizinga with his "cultuurgeschiedenis". It is an old word, but it is really fashionable for about ten years, or maybe only the last five years.**

And why is that, what has produced this fashion?

Well, that is not easy to explain but I think there surely exist a kind of disillusionment with social-scientific history and a decline of interest in politics and political history. In general there is a change in what interests students. People nowadays just seem to be more interested in "mentalité", in culture, than in the "hard facts" of social and economic history.

I believe those facts are not so hard. They are only "hard" because they are perceived as such.

**I think there is a kind of disillusionment with the idea of science and also a very influential cultural relativism, elements you already mentioned in your lecture. They are very strong.**

Well of course there are dangers there. This can lead on to a sort of anarchy and subjectivism and also a lack of rigour.

**I think there are already many signs of this lack of rigour. Many people argue that the idea of science is just a relic of the nineteenth century. History in any case is not a science and as a result concepts like "proof", "reference to the sources", "clear writing and clear thinking" are of no, or only little importance.**

There has been a tendency to reconsider whether history and fiction are different subjects, for example in the writings of Hayden White.<sup>11</sup> A lot of people say history is after all a literary form and it is shaped by the conventions of the genre and ask therefore whether it is any different from writing a novel. Well we know it is different from writing a novel.

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**I think everybody who has ever done any research is bound to say it is different.**

I agree, but at the same time it has certain elements of creativity in it. I do not know, it may be that the people who are genuinely scientifically minded are now scientists and are not doing any history at all and so the sort of people left to do history are the woolly-minded ones.

**You could very well be right. I think the same kind of people who studied anthropology ten years ago at the moment are studying cultural history at departments of history or art history.**

They see history as a soft subject. I am not in favour of regarding history as a soft subject at all.

**I think it is a very "hard" subject because it is a very difficult subject.**

Quite. You can see how the *History Workshop* embodies a lot of this.<sup>12</sup> It often is very sentimental, nostalgic. It is partly meant to encourage working people to do history, which of course is fine. But as a result it is often very indulgent to work which is very sloppy.

**It is better to do history at the History Workshop than to become a hooligan.**

Exactly.

**Is the study of popular culture, as promoted by the History Workshop a general development in England?**

I think it is slightly fringe. I think it is more associated with the polytechnics than with the universities. Oxford history for example is still quite traditional in a lot of ways. I would not have said that popular history has swept everything before it at all. In a sense political history is still at the centre of history at Oxford.

**A final question. As you have noticed the study of cultural history is very fashionable in the Netherlands at the moment. Can you discern the same tendency in British history?**

No. It is a pluralist place. There are a lot of different things going on. Economic history is certainly in real trouble. That is partly of

course because it has become very technical. The *Economic History Review* for example in the thirties, forties and early fifties was a journal which everybody read because there were general articles in it which were relevant to anybody. Then it became very technical and it ceased to be read. There is a tendency of course for there to be more and more specialisms. For example *Past and Present* which I am associated with is doing all right but we are suffering a little because of the proliferation of smaller journals on very specialized subjects.'

## Noten

1. De lezing waar hier naar wordt verwezen, is de lezing die Thomas voorafgaand aan dit interview hield in de Dom te Utrecht. Zij werd aangekondigd onder de titel 'Cultural history and early modern England'. Zij zal worden gepubliceerd in de congresbundel van het congres *Balans en perspectief van de Nederlandse cultuurgeschiedenis*.
2. Voor een analyse en evaluatie van de benadering van Lévi-Strauss zie A. de Ruijter, *Een speurtocht naar het denken. Een inleiding tot het structuralisme van Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Assen 1979).
3. Voor deze omschrijving zie C. Geertz, *Local knowledge: further essays in interpretive anthropology* (New York 1983) 33. Geertz gaat nader in op de aanpak en vooronderstellingen van Lévi-Strauss in zijn artikel 'The cerebral savage: on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss' in: Idem, *The interpretation of cultures* (New York 1973) 345-359.
4. De invloed van het denken van Max Weber in *Religion and the decline of magic* en *Man and the natural world* is evident.
5. De recensie waarnaar Thomas verwijst, is opgenomen in *The New York Review of Books* van 9 maart 1978 onder de titel 'The rise of the fork'.
6. Het boek van Macfarlane waarvan hier sprake is, heet *The origins of English individualism* (Oxford 1978). Thomas verwijst naar de - zeer felle en negatieve - recensie van Lawrence Stone in *The New York Review of Books* van 19 april 1979. Voor een overzicht van het debat over het genoemde boek van Macfarlane zie A. Macfarlane, *The culture of capitalism* (Oxford 1987) 191-222.
7. Voor een analyse van de interpretatieve antropologie zoals haar bekendste representant Geertz die beoefent, zie J.W Bakker, *Enough profundities already! A reconstruction of Geertz's interpretive anthropology* (Amsterdam 1987).

8. Voor Ginzburgs 'conjectural model' - in het Nederlands aangeduid als 'indicie-paradigma' - zie Carlo Ginzburg, 'Sporen. Wortels van een indicie-paradigma' opgenomen in: Idem, *Omweg als methode. Essays over verborgen geschiedenis, kunst en maatschappelijke herinnering* (Nijmegen 1988) 206-261.
9. Een goed overzicht van het werk van Bourdieu biedt de door D. Pels samengestelde selectie daaruit, uitgegeven onder de titel *Opstellen over smaak, habitus en het veldbegrip* (Amsterdam 1989).
10. Thomas verwijst hier naar het project *America. A cultural history* van David Hackett Fischer. Hiervan is op dit moment verschenen D.H. Fischer, *Albion's seed. Four British folkways in America* (New York 1989).
11. Een goed inzicht in de ideeën van deze zeer invloedrijke Amerikaanse geschiedfilosoof en tevens een overzicht van de toenemende belangstelling voor het narratieve element in de geschiedbeoefening biedt H. White, 'The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory', *History and Theory* 23 (1984) 1-34.
12. Voor een bespreking van werk en 'filosofie' van de History Workshop zie S. Leydesdorff, 'History Workshop', *Te Elfder Ure* september 1983, 477-503.