

# Uneasy history: some reflections on *ego*, culture, and social institutions<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

In his lecture for the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences [KNAW], held after his reception of the Heineken Prize of Historical Science, the American historian Jan de Vries, professor of history and economics, made a public case of the growing disintegration of the field of economic history: 'Economic history is a field of study that seeks to integrate two very different academic disciplines. Over the years these disciplines have grown further apart, to the detriment of both. Arguably, the greater harm has been to history, which has withdrawn from direct engagement with many social phenomena'.<sup>2</sup> Jan de Vries' position in this matter is to sustain a dialogue between history and economics, 'primarily by example'. By reconstructing the webs and models that channel and constrain the people, he wants to bring history back into economics through an understanding of the institutions and organizations that shape people's behaviour. Reversely, it is this institutional field that keeps him within the historical discipline. It links economy up with networks of traders, with town and village, with corporation and trade, with household and family, and hence with the intellectual and cultural dimensions of everybody's existence and of everyday life.

The unease voiced by Jan de Vries echoes a more profound uneasiness felt by historians of culture. Just like economic history, cultural history has gone a long way since its rise in the nineteenth century and its definition as one of the *Kulturwissenschaften* in the early twentieth century. Do, at present, economic history and

1 Revised version of the paper read at the N.W.Posthumus conference "The impact of culture on economic and social evolution", 15 September 2000.

2 Jan de Vries, "Towards a history that counts. Meaning and method in historical research" (Amsterdam 2 October 2000). Quoted from the abstract distributed by the KNAW.

cultural history still pertain to the same 'total' discipline of history? Do they still concern the same matter? Is the past enough in itself to guarantee a common narrative? Do we really speak the same language? The division of the Dutch academic discipline of history into two great but profoundly different research schools, one for cultural history (the Huizinga Institute), the other for social and economic history (the N.W. Posthumus Institute), is, for instance, merely another, institutional translation of an apparently profound split between the two main thematic branches of the historical discipline. But shouldn't there be only one, integral historical discipline, just like there is only one past, common to us all? If different viewpoints are legitimate, such distinctions should only concern the vision of the past – history seen under the viewpoint of culture, society, policy, economics -, the interpretation of history, and the narrative, not the academic position of the historical subdisciplines as such. Every form of history writing, in whatever department or on whatever topic that may be, remains first and foremost subject to the general rules of describing, analysing and interpreting the past, or, better, of constructing a meaningful relation between past experience and present-day perception – or shouldn't I say: between past perception and present-day experience?

Economic historians are remarkably strong when theorizing inside their field or regarding their topic, but with some exceptions – Fernand Braudel being one of the most notable among them – they are not extremely keen on historical theory itself. In this matter, they generally adopt a rather pragmatic, and more or less empiricist attitude, and avoid questioning the relation between 'reality' and 'perception', or between 'perceived' and 'constructed' historical images. Even Braudel considered history primarily as a social science, just like his fellow-historians of the first and the second *Annales*-waves – 'social' having in this case the narrow, French connotation, as opposed to 'cultural', not the broad, British sense, that normally includes culture. However subtle Braudel's analyses may have been, he did not really question the reality of historical evidence itself. The third, decidedly culturalist *Annales*-wave didn't convince him nor gain his approval, since he opposed himself violently against – to quote again the wordings of Jan de Vries in his lecture – any form of 'pernicious humanism' and 'militant anthropocentrism'.

That opposition has been the starting-point of this article, which must not be assessed as a research paper in the usual sense of the word. It is rather a personal reflection, suggested by my practice as a cultural historian, on the difficult triangular relationship between history at large, cultural history, and the position of the historian. It should be seen as a contribution, forcibly debatable, to the general discussion. The reader will discover that I am in favour of a different kind of cultural history, less centered around a historical field called 'culture', yet more 'culturalised' in its approach of history. I will not try to convert the reader, however, I just want to make my point.

## 2. Questions from an exhibition

Let me start with an open case. Just before closing I went to visit, for the second time, the exhibition by which the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum has decided to mark its 200th anniversary, *The Glory of the Golden Age*. My first visit had taken place just before the opening, in empty halls, void of people, but with painters still busy. The colours on the walls were still strikingly bright, and in the absence of visitors, they changed the very perception of the masterpieces – a bit like it must have been, as we may presume, in the houses of the rich of Amsterdam, and still more in their many country-homes outside the town.

From the point of view of the historian, there might be something to object to the very choice of the Golden Age as the focus of Dutch culture, and still more to that of the visual works of art as its main glory, but after all, a museum has to show its masterpieces. Not philology or philosophy, engineering, mathematics or religion, but Dutch painting is by now the main asset of Dutch culture on the market, and we may be glad that the real works haven't yet been replaced by computer simulations, gameboys, or other forms of virtual reality, like the microforms have replaced the documents in the reading rooms of the archives, changing almost imperceptibly but irrevocably the very perception of the past. Anyway, such exhibitions make us think about the relationship between economy, society and culture, but also about culture and people – which is not forcibly the same.

One thing must be granted: in no other period Holland has produced so many masterpieces as in the seventeenth century. Social and economic historians such as Montias, De Vries and Van der Woude have done their homework: the production of art has been scrutinised, quantified, related to the population figures, to occupations and to local communities. Others have searched for the structure of the art market itself, both within and outside the Dutch Republic. Correlations have been calculated, links with economic prosperity made plausible, traditions of decoration, either civic or religious, questions of supply and demand, social considerations of status, style and representation have been brought forward. All in all, the historical Dutch art market has in a very short time emerged from nowhere. In that field at least, economic history and cultural history seem to have found each other. A proud volume, *Art in history, history in art* has recently summarized the findings of the last decades.<sup>3</sup> But things are going on.

Yet, something is missing. The theme of the tremendous art production remains a challenge for the cultural historian. All right for the link with economic prosperity. But why was the production of pictures so scanty in Zeeland, a province probably as prosperous as Holland in those first, deciding decades of the seventeenth century? Zeeland produced culture in the form of texts – literature, poetry, ser-

3 David Freedberg & Jan de Vries, *Art in history, History in art. Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture* (Santa Monica, Calif. 1991).

mons, religious prose, by rhetoricians, by popular authors like De Brune or Cats, by dynasties of pietist ministers like Teellinck or Udemans -, but virtually no images, at least not in a way comparable to Holland.<sup>4</sup> Zeeland's booming capital Middelburg was not even the pictorial equivalent of smaller and second-range but equally prosperous Holland towns such as Dordrecht, Rotterdam or Gouda. Zeeland authors cherished the moralising didactics of the emblem books, and they found in Adriaen van de Venne a gifted artist, whose suggestive etchings did a great deal to popularise the moral messages of Jacob Cats all over the Dutch Republic. But with few exceptions the Zeeland towns were mainly consumers, not producers of the visual arts.

Reversely, some of the towns of the inner provinces, which managed only difficultly to survive or to resurface after the long, disastrous war, soon enjoyed a flourishing art life. Why did Gerard Terborch and other painters succeed in Zwolle and Deventer precisely? And why Theodoor van Tulden in Bois-le-Duc? Was it the personal quality of the painter who managed to impose himself on those poor art markets and create a genuine demand? Why don't we find the same quality and a similar market in quite comparable greater towns, such as Groningen, Nijmegen, or even Maastricht? The narrative about the interplay between economics, society and culture that seems logical on the macro-scale of a country, loses therefore its evidence on the smaller scale of a province or town. When similar conditions do not produce similar results, then what is the argument's value?

Other questions arise, when strolling through such an exhibition. Why don't we know the personal names, or even the family they belong to, of so many people represented on expensive portraits, which clearly were considered as important investments in culture, with regard to money, social status, and perhaps emotional involvement too? Was representation a virtue so tightly bound to the individual personality, to the self, that after one's death one's identity rapidly fell into oblivion? Yet we know that the portraits of the parents, the children, the ancestors, were carefully handed over to the next generation: they testified to the sense of *lignée*, and enhanced the family's status by showing its kinship. They made business and economic prosperity a matter of persons knit together in a family. At what stage did such a family lose its interest in the identity of its ancestors? Could there be a particular reason linked up with Dutch kinship structures or with social memory?

More specifically we may ask what pictures really were meant for. Was it for consumption in the economic sense of the word, that is: acquisition, property, heritage? In that sense, culture wouldn't be much more than a business-like asset of social life. But who among us doesn't want more? Exhibiting pictures, even collecting and possessing them, did enhance one's social status. Moreover, the icono-

4 P.J. Meertens, *Letterkundig leven in Zeeland in de zestiende en de eerste helft der zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 1943). At this moment, a team of scholars around Bart Ramakers is preparing a reassessment of this work.

logical school in art history has during the past decades made a strong case of the moral messages contained or concealed in the pictures. But there is no message without a receiver, who is also a decoder. Therefore, such interpretations make the picture an interface between an active encoder and an equally active decoder. In other words, the picture serves as a go-between, an instrument of interplay: it involves a practice consisting in the individual appropriation of images, norms and values that come from the social sphere, a group or community.

Would there be any historian of material culture who has never thought of penetrating into the consumer's mind in order to analyse his motives for acquisition? To grasp the visual, intellectual and emotional culture engaged in the enjoyment of an object, the contemplation of a picture, and the reconnaissance of the aesthetic, learned and moral values involved in its interpretation and of the symbolic and ethical repertoires used for its appropriation as a cognitive object. In brief, to seize the whole bundle of variables that preside over the economic act of acquisition of a precious good and its transformation into a meaningful individual possession. Indeed, we would penetrate into the heart of the seventeenth century when we manage to grasp simultaneously the act of acquiring or possessing an artefact and that of displaying, interpreting and enjoying it. Such a research profile could easily be considered as a scientific heresy, since it cannot claim that power of generalisation without which there supposedly is no true scientific reasoning. But it would bring us much nearer to seventeenth-century culture.

### 3. Patterns and choices

The acquisition of pictures and other artefacts always was a personal choice too. The historian is able to trace down cultural trends in such personal choices. Trends reveal common choices that suggest common values or common rituals. They allow the construction of tables, graphs and maps telling us which themes – biblical, classical, landscape, history, moralisation, genre, and so on – were prevalent during which period in what area, community, or social group. They tell us about group cultures. Under the surface of historical evidence they may even reveal those *hidden transcripts* lucidly analysed by James Scott some years ago.<sup>5</sup> As such, they allow the construction of a cultural landscape, of patterns of behaviour, status emblems, and ways of social distinction, of a group taste for a particular style, in short, of the public domain of the group cultures.<sup>6</sup>

5 James C. Scott, *Hidden transcripts: domination and the art of resistance* (New Haven, Conn. 1990).

6 Anton Schuurman & Pieter Spierenburg, (eds.), *Private domain, public inquiry: families and life-styles in the Netherlands and Europe, 1550 to the present* (Hilversum 1996).

But when it comes to explaining, trends as such are not of a great help. Trends refer to institutions in the informal sense of the word, embodied patterns of choice or institutionalised group values, such as moral imperatives, social obligations, the representation of political or ideological values (liberty, nation, faith), varieties of social intercourse, or to such forms of choice embodiment that Pierre Bourdieu has called the *habitus* or the *hexis*. They may even be connected to formal institutions, such as churches, civic militias, guilds, and any other corporation of the kind that has structured community life and state identity in early modern Holland.

Trends and other forms of group culture allow for correlations, since they single out particular elements of a cultural act as both constitutive and revelatory of a group practice or a group view.<sup>7</sup> But they never *explain* individual choices, not those of the individual person, and not even those of a particular group, confronted with a broader context. When asked for the scope of their work, many, if not most historians will state that they are concerned with societies, nations, groups. Collective behaviour is their main research theme, whatever aspect of history they are devoted to. Some historians have gone as far as to proclaim that the individual in itself is not a valid subject of history writing, and that biography is literature, not history. Individuals are rejected into the big melting pot of the 'softer' disciplines of the humanities. At best they are handed over to psychology or some other science most historians are a bit afraid of, since they deal with hidden dimensions of human life, difficult to grasp, to document, to quantify, and to interpret.

Yet a huge problem remains: even social beings are individual persons. Group decisions, group cultures, and social trends are embedded in a multiplicity of individual acts, ideas and ideals, humours and decisions, sometimes contradictory, but almost never smoothly assembled. Just as individual life cannot be constructed by the historian without referring to common moulds, group culture is constantly built up by individual acts. But since group culture selects among these acts only those elements which do not contradict the general interest of the group, and leaves the other elements aside, it never accounts for the composite structure of human experience as such. How to cope with this apparent paradox if we expect more from our *métier* of historians than constructing aggregate figures, making big comparisons, or endlessly correlating almost everything with anything else? How to bring human experience back into social analysis? How to account for *ego*?

Cultural history may be of some help here.<sup>8</sup> In cultural history as I understand it here, individual people cannot simply be reduced to a group culture, for the simple

7 This is the theoretical assumption underlying any research on group culture, for example the Group cultures section of the N.W. Posthumus Institute, with its research on public behaviour, consumption, social cohesion, social control, cultural dynamics, etc.

8 An interesting state of the art of Dutch cultural history has been given by Christoph

reason that individuals pertain to a variety of more or less overlapping social groups and institutional fields. There is no such a thing as a uniform personal identity shared by all the members of a group. Individual choices always share in the variety of cultural patterns pertaining to all those groups which make up an individual's social personality. Hence they involve a multiplicity of motivations. Reverse-ly, group decisions are the objectified result of a variety of partial individual motivations, whether consciously taken or not, and derive from a wide range of individual positions. Whereas social history may content itself with the analysis of group cultures, cultural history wants therefore to go beyond. It intends to search for the individual configuration which accounts for a person's participation in a variety of social patterns and for his or her<sup>9</sup> adhesion to social values. Its ambition is to identify the strains within and between such individual configurations which induce social dynamics. It is not the variety itself that singles out cultural history, since that variety is the foundation of social history too – but cultural history identifies itself by its propensity to connect social variety with individualised parameters.

It must be clear that cultural history, as I see it here, is not forcibly about the individuals themselves. Though not at all reducible to a biographical history, but is nevertheless concerned with individual choices, actions, views and representations. Biography – in particular collective forms of biography such as prosopography, macrobiography, life cycle research, cohort analysis, or career reconstruction – may be its method, but not its scope. It may be the narrative form of cultural history, but is not its primary aim. In its research design, this cultural history tries to respect the subject's autonomy, integrity and identity as the three key assets of human agency in history. What keeps all these elements together, is the sense of meaning given by the individual to this particular configuration in a continuous dialogue with the surrounding world, the context, the social groups in which he or her is consciously or unconsciously involved. Considered under this angle, the individual is the particular historical person in whom a variety of social values come simultaneously into being and where formal and informal institutions are made real as a specific pattern of behaviour – a kind of cultural DNA code characteristic for every single individual being. In this sense, the individual can be defined as a particular set of embodied predispositions and of shared participations in group cultures, group codes and group values – a set that is triggered off over and over again by the interaction between the needs or impulses of the individual, and the group stimuli that radiate from the social context. What such a cultural history tries to do, is to consider seriously, and to operate as a form of historical

Strupp, "Der lange Schatten Johan Huizingas. Neue Ansätze zur Kulturgeschichtsschreibung in den Niederlanden", in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 23 (1997) 44-69.

9 In this article, masculine forms should of course be read as masculine/feminine.

research, the individual pole of this scheme, where social and economic history mostly, if not exclusively, look for its effects in the social sphere.

#### 4. Avoiding reductionism

Whenever individual people are considered under the angle of their participation in group cultures, the risk of reductionism looms large. One of the principal concerns of cultural history is therefore to avoid as much as possible any form of reductionism. Reducing the individual to particular segments of his proper socio-cultural configuration would diminish the riches of his potentiality for historical research. Isolating the individual from his integral network of positions and solidarities with others would conceal at least part of the motivations involved and therefore cloud the intelligence of all. Such forms of reductionism precociously cut off a range of possible meanings, long before the historian has scrutinised them in full, and they prevent the historian's access to alternative explanations embedded in hidden parts of human experience or human motivation.

Let me take a very simple example from my own research on the history of education. Easily traceable cultural trends such as attendance rates of schools and universities are often explained by confronting them with the evolution of wheat prices or other price graphs. Such correlations are virtually meaningless if the basic assumptions of the induced relation between socio-economic realities and cultural choices are not made explicit, and if one doesn't try to avoid the reduction of the individual choices to one single variable. Indeed, one has to realise that education, being not only an economic and social but also a cultural asset, may well be motivated by a quite different or even opposite set of values, indifferent for price evolutions or responding in an inverted way.<sup>10</sup> Such correlations, even if statistically correct, cannot single out the decisive factor from a bundle of motivations. They fail to seize the social complexity of human agency as well as its individual setting.

In the last resort, cultural history wants to grasp the individual decision itself, the way in which the individual person tries to master his destiny by designing his own survival strategy. As such, this pretention is, of course, deemed to remain a utopical challenge, if not a Promethean ambition, but it is the final motivation of a culture-directed way of doing cultural history. Unlike many forms of social and economic history, such a way of coping with culture will never achieve a totally

10 For two examples of a complex relation between such variables: Willem Frijhoff & Dominique Julia, *École et société dans la France d'Ancien Régime. Quatre exemples: Auch, Avallon, Condom et Gisors* [Cahiers des Annales, 35] (Paris 1975) 35; Willem Frijhoff, *La société néerlandaise et ses gradués 1575-1814: une recherche sérielle sur le statut des intellectuels* (Amsterdam/Maarsse 1981) 121-134.

plausible explanation of historical evidence, but at least it promises to go beyond the appearances of the individual's reduction to a social construct. It involves some major methodological dangers too. The unspoken promise of a personal re-experiencing of other people's hidden dimensions, of obtaining a full grasp of their personality, and finally of achieving a fusion of the historian himself with his research subject, explains the fascination of so many of our contemporaries for the history of mentalities, for microhistory, psychohistory, or emotionology, for the different forms of the new cultural history, cultural analysis, and all those other fashions in cultural history that try to understand by research or by narrative why people act as they did in particular contexts and against the background of apparently diverging, if not contradictory traditions or settings.

This is where *ego* comes in. Speaking of *ego* I do not simply mean the individual as part of a group, in his social setting, but the individual as an acting, feeling, speaking, and thinking being, in brief, as an autonomous subject of history. Is *ego* a credible subject of history-writing? Not only of cultural history but of social and economic history itself? The assumption that – whether overtly or unconsciously – directs the bulk of present-day history-writing is that history is only understandable at a collective level, as a form of group experience and inasmuch it can be seized as a social construct. The power of generalisation which group experience seems to confer to the individual experience, seems the underlying justification of most history-writing. In order to be understood as meaningful historical events, individual experiences must then be brought back to group repertoires, group images or group values, to schemes and moulds that make them recognisable as socially meaningful, even when all forms of personal meaning are totally clouded.

A recent case in point is the historical controversy about fasting girls of the past.<sup>11</sup> By moulding the phenomena observed into a single structure, i.e. the syndrome of anorexia, or anorexia nervosa, the historian creates only an apparent explanation, since he reduces the subject's experience to a recognisable, phenomenological form without asking for the bundle of meanings (gendered, psychological, cultural, religious, spiritual) attached to it in a given context, which may be the trigger of the experience for that particular person and locate it precisely on another cultural track. Such reductions falsely suggest that behind or beyond lasting forms of social ritual durable meanings can be detected, independently of the persons and the historical context concerned. Changes in historical meaning would simply be the result of the historian's changing theories or methods, without any

11 See Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy anorexia* (Chicago / London 1985); Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting girls. The emergence of anorexia nervosa as a modern disease* (Cambridge, Mass. 1988); Ron van Deth & Walter Vandereycken, *Van vastenwonder tot magerzucht. Anorexia nervosa in historisch perspectief* (Meppel / Amsterdam 1988); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast. The religious significance of food to medieval women* (Berkeley, Calif. 1987).

particular involvement of the historical subject. Without neglecting historical forms, structures, images and repertoires, cultural history as advocated in this article however wants to redirect its focus towards the historical subject understood in its autonomy.

Does such an autonomous subject exist historically? The question really is much less odd than it may seem at first sight. Actually, quite an area of cultural history is involved in research on the birth, or the rise, of the individual in history, and the ongoing process of individualisation is the major issue of much contemporary sociology.<sup>12</sup> By now a general agreement has grown among cultural historians according to which the consciousness of being an individual – a feeling or a certainty that previously had been visible only in the life of high spirits such as Plato, Cicero, Jesus or Augustine – became a more commonly shared dimension of European culture during the later Middle Ages. Simultaneously it created not only the individual conscience as a cultural category, but also a new relation between the individual person, social institutions and the community as a whole. The individual developed a new relation to social consciousness, intelligence and science, a new vision of belief, and a new definition of the public and the private sphere. Other historians have claimed a still later rise of the individual self, and of individual identity, during the early modern period or on the threshold of modernity.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the whole new sector of autobiographical research starts from the presupposition that individual consciousness and indeed individual introspection are historical categories that have not always been into existence nor everywhere with the same intensity.<sup>14</sup>

12 To name only some of the major studies: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York / London 1958); Hans Drexler, *Die Entdeckung des Individuums* (Salzburg 1966); *Individu et société à la Renaissance. Colloque international tenu en avril 1965* [Université Libre de Bruxelles] (Paris 1967); Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Renaissance self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, Ill. 1980); Claude Delhez-Sarlet & Maurizio Catani, (eds.), *Individualisme et autobiographie en Occident* (Brussels 1983); Aron J. Gourevitch, *La naissance de l'individu dans l'Europe médiévale* (Paris 1997); Robert Muchembled, *L'invention de l'homme moderne. Sensibilités, moeurs et comportements collectifs sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris 1988); Richard van Dülmen, (ed.), *Erfindung des Menschen. Schöpfungssträume und Körperbilder 1500-2000* (Vienna/Cologne/Weimar 1998).

13 For example Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self. Autobiography and Self-Identity in England 1591-1791* (Oxford 1997).

14 On autobiography, see the synthetical studies by R.M. Dekker, "Egodocuments in the Netherlands from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century", in: Erin Griffey, (ed.), *Envisioining self and status. Self-representation in the Low Countries 1400-1700* (Hull 2000) 255-285; R.M. Dekker, *Childhood, memory and autobiography in Holland from the Golden Age to Romanticism* (London 1999); and Philippe Lejeune, *Je est un autre: l'autobiographie, de la littérature aux médias* (Paris 1980); Philippe Lejeune, (ed.), *L'autobiographie en procès. Actes du colloque de Nanterre, 18-19 octobre 1996* (Paris

I would suggest that for any such analysis of individual persons in history, the researcher has to engage himself, to involve himself as an acting person into his research design. There is no objective research model available that permits to realise a cultural analysis of the singularity of historical persons, and perhaps not even of historical groups. The historian has then to make his own choices, to create his own research design, in which his personal choices and positions forcibly resound. However, by doing so, he exposes himself to losing the necessary distance between his research object and himself. He may easily become subject to various forms of over-identification, or over-interpretation, in which the research object and the researcher run the risk to overlap, to identify, or even to fuse.

Whoever has tried to write such a form of cultural history – as I did some years ago in the contextual biography I devoted to the life of a seventeenth-century Dutch orphan child<sup>15</sup> – has to cope with two disillusion: firstly his own disillusion of never attaining the perfect research model he has in mind, and, secondly, another disillusion about historical criticism. Indeed, most reviewers prefer to focus on the safe and ‘realistic’ aspects of the social history research contained in the story, and to avoid the pitfalls of a critical discussion about the research design itself and the involvement of the historian in his professional work. But by doing so, they deprive themselves of a golden opportunity to examine the intertwining of the social and the individual in history, both as historical subjects and in the embrace between the historical narrative and its narrator.

For the cultural historian, this is by no means an easy position. By trying to stake out and to realise a research design that is not really fashionable in the social sciences since it narrows the distance between the researcher and his object, cultural history in the sense as I advocate it here fragilises its trustworthiness. It runs the risk to put itself on the ‘soft’, humanities side of history, and to fall victim to all kinds of historical quackery – from common sense psychology to religious exaltation and fake sentimentality –, whereas history, in my opinion, should remain fundamentally a social science, certainly interested in human beings, but always in society.

1997); Roy Porter, (ed.), *Rewriting the self: histories from the Renaissance to the present* (London 1997); Kaspar von Greyerz, Hans Medick & Patrice Veit, (eds.), *Von der dargestellten Person zum erinnerten Ich. Europäische Selbstzeugnisse als historische Quellen* (Cologne 2001, in press).

15 Willem Frijhoff, *Wegen van Evert Willemsz. Een Hollands weeskind op zoek naar zichzelf, 1607-1647* (Nijmegen 1995).

## 5. Are definitions dangerous?

I would like to reflect here, in the remaining pages, on a possible issue out of this deadlock. The first question that arises then, is to know what exactly we understand by culture. Culture, as we know, is probably the most difficult domain of history to define. Culture is something shared, something expressed, something malleable and subject to change. It is at any rate about meaning or understanding, not simply about forms or artefacts. It involves both the mind and the body, but also the social body and the environment, physical as well as social. It is about use and appropriation, not simply about making, circulating and possessing.<sup>16</sup> It refers to doing rather than being, to process rather than structure, but since process cannot be understood without structuring the experience that forms the core of it, culture has to look for their interaction.

Some well-considered definitions of culture are available, and some readymade ones do exist also, but none of them has until now been able to impose itself in the humanities or the social sciences.<sup>17</sup> Those definitions of culture that happen to last are mostly complex ones. They lack the self-evidence of beauty and simplicity. But do we need a definition of culture altogether? Though I am not afraid of explaining the concepts I use, I do not want to fall into the trap of pure theory. For the historian, theory is at most a tool, not an aim in itself. Concepts must be defined and clarified, and inside a given text their users have to stick to their meaning if the concepts should make sense, but definitions are valid only within the limits that are set by their author, and understood by what we may call, with Fish, the 'interpretive community' of the audience, sharing implicitly and unconsciously the rules of the game.<sup>18</sup>

Outside such an interpretive community, definitions of particular concepts very often don't make sense, and quickly lose their meaning. Just like the chemical definition of water, quite meaningful in itself, is useless and meaningless when you open the tap in order to drink or to wash your hands, any definition of culture is

16 Willem Frijhoff, "Toeëigening: van bezitsdrang naar betekenisgeving", *Trajecta* 6, 2 (1997) 99-118; idem, "Modes of doing cultural history. Foucault reformed by Certeau: Historical strategies of discipline and everyday tactics of appropriation", in: *Arcadia. Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* 33, 1 (1998) 92-108. A similar perspective applied to collective action is brought forward by Gita Deneckere, "Sociale geschiedenis, het einde van de ideologie en de terugkeer van de bezieling. Een essay met de focus op het onderzoek naar collectieve actie in de jaren 1990", in: *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis*, 26/3 (2000) 239-262.

17 See the contribution by Arthur P. Wolf to this issue.

18 S. Fish, *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities* (Cambridge / London, 1980); Eugene Goodheart, "The text and the interpretive community", *Daedalus* 112, 1 (1983) 215sq.

bound to space, to time, to use, and to the group using it. I would be tempted to say that it is forcibly culturally biased. Although it may be useful for an historian to ask a sociologist or an anthropologist for his definition of culture, outside the interpretive community of historical sociology or anthropology such a definition would be virtually useless.

That is probably the reason why social, and especially cultural historians, very often do not feel at ease with economics, and particularly so when economists deal with culture. Cultural historians obviously do not speak the same language as economists do, neither do they tackle the same realities. It is extremely difficult to connect the language of economics with that of cultural history, even if they use the same words: culture, values, institutions. Even if they use comparable definitions, they happen to give them a different understanding. Roughly speaking, economists tend to treat culture either as a commodity, an object or a product in itself, or as an element of an institutional setting, corporate culture for example, or cultural values and practices in the market-place. In the institutionalised field of cultural values, norms and artefacts, economic agency has a lot of trouble to free itself from the rules and patterns of objective reasoning.<sup>19</sup> In economic history, arguments most often serve to prove a causality, trace an evolution or make a demonstration. They present themselves therefore as positive, dislike useless gradation and finally intend to close the discussion – whereas in cultural history everything is a matter of shading and differentiation, of ‘more or less’ and approximation. A perceptive essay in cultural history will finish by opening an argument not closing it.

Some economic historians are involved in great narratives about culture. David Landes has told us what looks like a fantasy-story about economy and culture, mainly at the intention of an Anglosaxon readership – another interpretive community.<sup>20</sup> On a broader scale, he apparently copied the example of the French public historian Alain Peyrefitte, who selected from the historical evidence for his French audience all those bits of culture that together would support his argument for an embedding of desirable economic institutions in a cultural practice of consensus politics, legitimised by his interpretation of the so-called Dutch miracle.<sup>21</sup> Both authors are, or have been cherished by the public, eager to see their basic certainties confirmed and their group identity enhanced. Such legitimising stories

19 Arjo Klamer, (ed.), *The value of culture: on the relationship between economy and the arts* (Amsterdam 1996).

20 David Landes, *The wealth and poverty of nations. Why some are so rich and others so poor* (New York 1998).

21 Alain Peyrefitte, *Du ‘miracle’ en économie. Leçons au Collège de France* (Paris 1995); idem, *La société de confiance: essai sur les origines et la nature du développement* (Paris 1995).

have few or nothing to do with cultural history as I see it. In their approach, culture stands out as a common good that is produced on the market of the historical past and then reified as a commodity for the present. Culture appears there basically as an alibi for not looking after more complex causalities.

The problem of economic history – and *mutatis mutandis* that of much social history too – is that it has for a too long time navigated on the compass of ‘big is beautiful’: the taller the scale of arguing, the better the argument. Cultural history doesn’t work that way, and I use the term ‘work’ here in the sense of ‘taking effect’. In cultural history, for example, quantification is a tool, never an argument. Two or three decades of quantification in the field of cultural history have convincingly shown that the constitution of series, the quantification of commodities, and the search for a sound documentation certainly remains an bare necessity, but one that at best reveals the questions that really matter, without explaining anything in itself.<sup>22</sup> You get some informed correlations, but correlations do not explain culture, since culture, at least in the eyes of the cultural historian, must be about how people perceive and act, how their artefacts, values, ideas and emotions not only are made but also appropriated by their users, and how such possessions in turn may help to transform their own perception.

Would this be a new definition of culture? I do not think so. The difference between the definitions of culture used by the social sciences, on the one hand side, and the specific focus of cultural history that I advocate, on the other side, is that for the cultural historian culture essentially is not an object of definition, but a line of approach. Of course, a basic understanding is necessary of what cultural history is about: culture is human experience communicated to others, I would be tempted to say, or perhaps everything that is imagined or produced by man and made meaningful through interaction.<sup>23</sup> It is something linked up with human agency,

22 The essay by W. Brulez, *Cultuur en getal. Aspecten van de relatie tussen economie-maatschappij-cultuur in Europa tussen 1400-1800* (Amsterdam 1986), was a search for the economic and social meaning of culture through a quantitative approach. In practice this stimulating exercise has however found little response.

23 I may refer to my own definitions in: *Cultuur, mentaliteit: illusies van elites?* [inaugural lecture Erasmus university Rotterdam] (Nijmegen 1984), partial transl. as “Kultur und Mentalität: Illusion von Eliten?”, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 2, 2 (1991) 7-33; idem, “Impasses en beloften van de mentaliteitsgeschiedenis”, *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis* 10, 36 (November 1984) 406-437; idem, “Inleiding: historische antropologie”, in: Peter te Boekhorst, Peter Burke & Willem Frijhoff, (eds.), *Cultuur en maatschappij in Nederland, 1500-1850; een historisch-antropologisch perspectief* (Amsterdam / Meppel / Heerlen 1992) 11-38; idem, *Wegen van Evert Willemsz.*, 39-46. Broad theoretical perspectives are presented in: Lynn Hunt, (ed.), *The New Cultural History. Studies on the History of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, Calif. 1989); Peter Burke, (ed.), *New perspectives on historical writing* (Cambridge 1991); idem, *History and social theory* (Cambridge 1992); Willem Melching & Wyger Velema, (eds.), *Main trends in cul-*

human cognition, and human motivation. It is something shared with others, and something made significant through other people's look. It may be concerned with material things, social groups, or immaterial dimensions of life, but it cannot exist without being perceived.

Basically however cultural history uses culture not as a theme, but as a method. It is more about the process of communication, the repertoires and the transformations involved, than about the contents as such. It looks for the way in which 'culture' (as a social science notion) works as an element of the general process of history. And it is in itself the way of telling it. As a method, it may change over time since it analyses, and uses at the same time, the very categories of human perception. It is therefore culturally biased in itself. In a certain sense, it is perhaps not much more than a sensibility for the contingency of everything that is subject to human agency: values, symbols, codes, rituals, but also ideas, concepts, dreams, and up to the human artefacts themselves.

In this sense, cultural history as such does not exist. Or better: it has no existence as a separate subdiscipline. There is no history unless integral history, and any specialisation should be viewed as a way of looking at the common general reality. Therefore, cultural history should not intend to construct a new specialisation in history, but examine precisely that common reality at the intersection of its cultural variables with other dimensions: social, economic, political, etcetera. Obviously, there is no reason why the cultural historian should limit his research to the cultural aspects alone, nor why the social or economic historian should restrict his interests to social or economic dimensions of the past.<sup>24</sup>

Hence, socio-economic notions may be quite meaningful concepts in cultural history. Take the market concept. In early modern cultural history, the market may be a very useful concept, but mainly of a metaphorical nature, as Jean-Christophe Agnew has shown some time ago.<sup>25</sup> What should interest the cultural historian, is not so much, or not only, the exchange of commodities that takes place on the

*tural history. Ten essays* (Amsterdam / Atlanta, GA 1994); D. Chaney, *The cultural turn. Scene-setting essays on contemporary cultural history* (London 1994); Rudolf Vierhaus & Roger Chartier, *Wege zu einer neuen Kulturgeschichte* (Göttingen 1995); Peter Burke, *Varieties of cultural history* (Cambridge 1997); A. Kuper, *Culture: the anthropologist's account* (Cambridge, Mass. 1999); Victoria E. Bonnell & Lynn Hunt, (eds.), *Beyond the cultural turn: new directions in the study of society and culture* (Berkeley, Calif. 1999), in particular W.H. Sewell Jr., "The concepts of culture", 35-61. Useful is the reader of French texts in translation, ed. by Jacques Revel & Lynn Hunt, *History: French constructions of the past* (New York 1995).

24 Willem Frijhoff, "Cultuur en mentaliteit: over sporen, tekens en bronnen", in: F. van Besouw, P. den Boer, F.W.N. Hugenholtz & Th. van Tijn, (eds.), *Balans en perspectief. Visies op de geschiedwetenschap in Nederland* (Groningen 1987) 189-204.

25 Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds apart: The market and the theatre in Anglo-American thought* (Cambridge, Mass. 1986).

physical market, but the market as the representation of a place of exchange, either concerned with real goods or in the symbolic order, the perception of the values of exchange, the rules of bargaining, power play, and so on.<sup>26</sup> The market may even be a purely metaphorical notion – but one that facilitates the institutionalisation of meanings, values, and identities. It can be used, for example, as a literary artefact to canalise and to handle emotional investments of individuals who discover and explore each other in a free relationship. The institutional changes of the market notion over time may therefore reveal some crucial developments in the management of *ego* and the other.

## 6. Strategies

For handling such , interactions, dilemmas or oppositions between the social and the individual, the big history and the small, the number and the unique, and so on, several strategies can be imagined. The first and perhaps best known strategy is that of a narrative hierarchisation of different time modules: Fernand Braudel's three-step model of structure, conjuncture and event certainly is its most celebrated expression, culture being present at all three steps, but in different ways and obeying to different rhythms of development. Strategies of coping with the apparent anomalies of cultural transformation over time may use similar, but more vertical distinctions, such as the changing interface between the public and the private sphere, the dynamical opposition between insiders and outsiders (as is one of the current issues of immigration studies), or the 'hidden transcripts' behind public codes of behaviour.

Another solution is the strategy of scaling, applied not so much to the historical data as such, as to historical method.<sup>27</sup> Basically, this strategy assumes that the unmanageable complexity of macrohistorical dynamics can be clarified and made accessible to cultural analysis by a scale reduction unto the microlevel. Naturally the major question remains whether micro is able to explain macro. Will a scale reduction by simplifying the model at the same time reduce its riches intolerably

26 Recently, for example, in the 'medical market' the market metaphor has proved its usefulness for the renewal of medical history. The concept of the 'pastoral market' is currently tested in religious history (it is the title of the new NWO-funded research programme of F.A. van Lieburg at the Free University, Amsterdam).

27 Jacques Revel, (ed.), *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à l'expérience* (Paris 1996); Bernard Lepetit, "La société comme un tout: sur trois formes d'analyse de la totalité sociale", in: *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques* 22 (April 1999) 21-38. Cf. also the stimulating overview of Marc Jacobs, "Actornetwerk. Geschiedenis, sociale wetenschappen. De nieuwe *Annales* en het werk van Boltanski en Thévenot: een (re)view-artikel", in: *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis*, 22/3 (1996) 260-289.

and therefore cut off the full range of its public, private or hidden meanings? For such a scaling strategy, two options are available. On the one hand a simple scale reduction, such as an anthropological, 'total' study of a historical community on the microlevel, yet still in a top down perspective: micro really would explain macro, and macro is then what really matters. In that option, the research effort is primarily concerned with 'microdata', i.e. unaggregated data on individual persons, households or other social unities on the smallest scale, such as the life cycle, a career, individual strategies of economic welfare, social ascent and cultural development. Micromovements wouldn't be nothing else but a reduced model of macromovements. The reasoning goes from the unique to the universal.<sup>28</sup>

The other option is microhistory in its own right, that is the intensive, multifaceted and multidimensional study of very small objects in history (an event, a judicial act, a ritual, an apparently ordinary person). Microhistory's merit is the attention it pays to the decisive role of the individual actors in history and their interpretive skills: meaning comes from the actors themselves, it may really change something at the bottom level, and hence leave its trace in history itself. Its main problem however is the legitimacy of the historian's narrative transition from small to great: do small issues permit large conclusions? The problem has been condensed in the far from academic question how 'normal' the microhistorical 'exception' may be called to allow some form of general, 'total' history. In fact, behind microhistorical experiences macrohistorical explanatory models still loom large. There is no need to repeat here Carlo Ginzburg's theoretical positions and Peer Vries's criticism of the *microstoria*.<sup>29</sup> Such criticism was already inaugurated by the microhistorians themselves (in particular by Giovanni Levi), who form a less monolithical block than sometimes has been suggested.<sup>30</sup>

## 7. Culture and social institutions

Can we imagine a third way, where micro and macro are not opposed to each other, nor deduced or derived from each other? Where culture on its necessarily smaller

28 Behavioural economics, i.e. the actor perspective applied to the entrepreneur, tends to go that way.

29 P.H.H. Vries, *Vertellers op drift. Een verhandeling over de nieuwe verhalende geschiedenis* (Hilversum 1990).

30 Cf. Burke, *New perspectives*, in particular the essay on microhistory by Giovanni Levi, the author of one of the major studies in microhistory: *Inheriting power: The story of an exorcist* (Chicago, Ill. 1988) [transl. of *L'eredità immateriale: carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del Seicento* (Turin 1985)]; Winfried Schulze, (ed.), *Sozialgeschichte, Alltagsgeschichte, Mikro-Historie: Eine Diskussion* (Göttingen 1994); Maurizio Gribaudi, Giovanni Levi & Charles Tilly, (eds.), *Mikrogeschichte, Makrogeschichte: komplementär oder inkommensurabel?* (Göttingen 1998).

scale plays a role in its own right, as a fully-fledged partner of social and economic dynamics? Where the society will be respected as a whole? What then is really the factor culture in economic and social history? Can it be an explaining variable, or is it just an ornament that in final analysis does not really matter?

It is at this point that social institutions must enter the scene of historical work. In a research design confronted with *ego*, the cultural historian who does not want to be lost in mere subjectivism has to privilege some form of institutional analysis as the most obvious and secure way to the contextualisation of the individual's personality. Human beings cannot exist individually without the referential framework of social institutions.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps 'conventions' would be a more suitable word, since it is more actor-oriented and less contaminated by structuralism or ideology. Such institutions or conventions should not only be studied top down, for the support they provide to the community, but also bottom up, as historical forms in which the individual person shapes his identity and achieves his self-recognition. They are the frameworks of social control but at the same time of any personal development. In fact, such an analysis is the only sensible way to get a grip on the individual, if the historian doesn't want to be drowned in an ocean of approximations or confusions between his personal self and that of the subject that is his research theme. Yet, institutionalisation may adopt several forms and a variety of degrees of performance. Social institutions are the frozen forms of human agency. As such, they embody explicit values, but also tacit assumptions. Formal rules for human behaviour but also informal instruments and constraints. If marriage is a formal institution, prostitution is an equally valid informal one.

Let me take again an example from my own research. One important asset of the early modern Dutch society certainly was its openness to public discussion. In a recent book that my co-author Marijke Spies and I wrote on the zenith of the Dutch Golden Age, we have used this openness as an argument for the apparent well-being of that society, for its dynamism and its virtual ascendancy on other, neighbouring societies.<sup>32</sup> We called this social asset the 'discussion culture'. Yet, as we stated, that largely shared aspect of culture was subject to many limits. Political decisions were not really taken on the basis of public discussions. In fact, they were taken by the small minority of the regents, often in secret, and always without any formal consultation of the population, sometimes even against the few representatives of the citizenry who in some towns had to be consulted. In spite of the increasingly oligarchic political institutions of the Dutch Republic, there existed apparently at the same time some sort of opinion market, that underpinned the credibility of political decision-making, even without influencing it very much.

31 Cf. Anton C. Zijderveld, *The institutional imperative* (Amsterdam 2000).

32 Willem Frijhoff & Marijke Spies, *1650: Bevochten eendracht* (The Hague 1999; 2d ed. 2000).

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this opinion market became more and more formally institutionalised. It could function smoothly because of the very low level of formal censorship.<sup>33</sup> In the more than two thousand jokes on everyday life which have been collected by the seventeenth-century The Hague lawyer Aernout van Overbeke, we learn where public opinion was formed in actual fact: by the news bulletins, the pamphlets, books, and prints, through oral transmission in the new transportation system, the barges, but also in the discussions among neighbours, in the shops, in the churches and on the market-place itself.<sup>34</sup> The many thousands of different pamphlets and broadsheets printed during the seventeenth century tell us the same story: they speak of public discussions in taverns, barges, or market-places, in the stock-exchange or on the central place of Amsterdam, the Dam. Public opinion was therefore made in public spaces, not in the family or in the household. It started on the street side of the threshold, and there is some reason to believe that the doorstep was considered as a formal limitation between two very different worlds, with different values and codes of behaviour: the public sphere, and family life. Such an assumption would, at least, explain the different positions of, for example, women within the family and in public life, but also the growing importance of the household as a protected space for the transmission of group values.

In the public space, in the barges as well as in the neighbourhoods, special sets of rules, or codes of behaviour, must have guaranteed virtual immunity for dissenting opinions. They must have prevented verbal altercations from turning into public, physical and violent fights. Violence in the public space was not admitted in matters of religion, nor was it in matters of politics. The same applied to public bodies, such as the town councils or the many committees the Dutch were so fond of and which may be considered in themselves as a social performance of the discussion culture.<sup>35</sup> Although the public space of the Dutch Republic was formally devoted, and indeed restricted, to the values of the uncompromising Reformed church, it was in fact a neutral space where the main characteristic of its value system, Calvinist ethics and its limitative interpretation of public behaviour, was cancelled for the time being as soon as other opinions came across.

The famous article 13 of the 1579 Union of Utrecht, the treaty that functioned as the constitution of the Dutch confederation, guaranteed freedom of conscience to every citizen, in spite of the prohibition of any other public religion than the Cal-

33 Ingrid Weekhout, *Boekcensuur in de Noordelijke Nederlanden. De vrijheid van drukpers in de zeventiende eeuw* (The Hague 1998).

34 Aernout van Overbeke, *Anecdota sive historiae jocosae. Een zeventiende-eeuwse verzameling moppen en anekdotes*, Rudolf Dekker & Herman Roodenburg eds. (Amsterdam 1991).

35 A.Th. van Deursen, *Mieus en Meynert: twee ego-documenten uit Graft en De Rijp* (Amsterdam 1996).

vinist Church in its orthodox variant.<sup>36</sup> People were quite aware of each other's confessional position, but could nevertheless discuss freely in the public space. In our study we have metaphorically called this informal institution the ecumenism of social intercourse (*omgangsoecumene*). A value system was created that, in the particular context of the Dutch social, political and religious configuration, was well adapted to the needs of that special period in the social evolution of the community: the need to cope with the conflicting values of the individual conscience, confessional interests, secular policy, and social inclusiveness.

That is not to say that confessional obedience didn't have any consequence in the public space of the Dutch community. On the contrary, confessional practice could be, and in the inner provinces indeed often was, an argument for social discrimination: artisans and shopkeepers of dissenting religious practice, specially Catholics, were sometimes thrown out of the guilds and corporations, and occasionally they were even deprived of their full rights of citizenship.<sup>37</sup> More generally speaking, non-Calvinists were not eligible for public functions and were therefore kept away from public power and politics.

Naturally dissenters and Catholics felt themselves discriminated, in spite of the formal liberty of expression they enjoyed in the public space. Every now and then they would show that quite clearly. That was, for example, the case in the summer of 1734 during the mutual panic that seized the Calvinists and Catholics and disturbed their relations profoundly. Indeed, rumours prophesied that the socially underlying party, the Catholics, would take over the command of the political institutions and of public life in the Dutch Republic after having murdered ritually all the Protestants in one, long, dark and fearful night.<sup>38</sup> Yet, everyday religious coexistence had been informally institutionalised in the Republic during the preceding one and a half century. It had been much admired from outside and was by then much discussed in the Dutch Republic itself under the new concept of 'toleration'.<sup>39</sup> Such institutionalisations of an informal character proved stronger than the old, formal modes of institutional violence between the two confessional groups that had emerged again during the weeks of the panic. But inevitably informal institutions lead in the long run to some formalisation: bottom-up everyday 'toler-

36 Cf. Willem Frijhoff, "Religious toleration in the United provinces: from 'case' to 'model'", in: R. Po-chia Hsia & H. van Nierop (eds.), *Calvinism and religious toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge 2001), in press.

37 Maarten Prak, "The politics of intolerance: guilds, citizenship and religion in the Dutch Republic", in: Hsia & Van Nierop, *Calvinism and religious toleration*, in press.

38 Willem Frijhoff, "De paniek van juni 1734", in: *Archief voor de geschiedenis van de katholieke kerk in Nederland* 19, 2 (1977) 170-233; idem, "Prophétie et société dans les Provinces-Unies aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles", in: Marie-Sylvie Dupont-Bouchat, Willem Frijhoff & Robert Muchembled, *Prophètes et sorciers dans les Pays-Bas, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris 1978) 325-362.

39 Willem Frijhoff, "Religious toleration".

ation' became a socially recognised value, debated in the public field of formal academic knowledge, and, during the course of the eighteenth century, finally translated into some forms of legislation.<sup>40</sup> It became even a distinctive mark of the self-image of the Dutch, a self-promoted element of their public identity.

For the cultural historian, the interesting point of this matter is firstly that social institutions allow him to connect the elements of an individual position to common fields of values, rituals and actions in the social sphere: marriage, confession, social segmentation, but also, in the informal sphere, unwritten codes of behaviour, values that transcend the laws of formal institutions, and rituals that tend to correct situations which are perceived as an informal state of injustice. Secondly, the distinction between formal and informal institutions allows us to reconstruct the configuration of the choices which were available to the individual with respect to the full range of his social obligations and limitations. Thirdly, it permits us to follow the subtleties of the individual's way through society. When navigating between formal and informal institutions, and trying to reconcile his interests with his duties, the individual makes choices which may appear as irrational, or paradoxical, or which, even if apparently logical, may for the untrained eye of the social historian conceal his true motivations. However, taken up in such a cultural reconstruction of individual positions, they make sense, and help to understand social evolutions that would otherwise remain unexplained.

## 8. Conclusion

It is time to conclude. It must be said that the cultural historian rarely feels at ease with the macro-approaches or the objectifications that often prevail in social and economic history. As far as social history is concerned, he feels a basic need for concepts and approaches which express not only the introduction of human agency as such, but of the individual as an explanatory factor of social agency. He wants to proclaim that social history is certainly always group-related, but deals not necessarily with groups as such. Nor is cultural history or history of mentalities always about individuals. What we have to perform in the future, is to establish a true dialogue between social history and cultural history, in order to take both approaches seriously, and to detect until what point they may enrich each other's research designs and narratives.

The preliminary condition is that social history be ready to share with the cultural historian a basic interest for individual persons as possible subjects of history

40 Th. Clemens, "Ijkpunt 1750 – Op zoek naar nieuwe grenzen in het politiek-religieuze landschap van de Republiek", in: C. Augustijn & A. Honée, (eds.), *Vervreemding en verzoening. De relatie tussen katholieken en protestanten in Nederland 1550-2000* (Nijmegen 1998) 69-101.

writing in their own right, and not only as reduced models of macrohistory – whereas the cultural historian has to accept the formal and informal social institutions as the places where the individual, as a participant in a wide range of group cultures, performs, shapes his social identity, and makes himself meaningful for the society at large. Cultural history wants to go beyond the objectivations of social groups, economic structures, or evolutions, in order to grasp the *ego* at work. Does *ego* have a meaning in history? Is individual history possible, is it meaningful as such? There is surely not a single really conscientious cultural historian who will ever be satisfied by individual history alone, by biography for its own sake, or by the psychohistory of the most individual emotions. Yet, unease will remain about any form of history with human experience left out, that so often is the public face of social and economic history writing. But is unease not the very motor of our research?