

We admire your strength, but we do not envy you

Johan Huizinga's image of America in the context of the interwar crisis of civilization.

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Abstract

The thesis examines the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's (1872-1945) image of America within the context of the so-called crisis of civilization during the Interbellum period. The underlying theoretical framework is that there is a European tradition of seeing America as a mirror of Europe. European observers of America were often, directly or indirectly, commenting on developments in Europe. During the Interbellum, this often took the form of seeing in America the future of Europe. The aim of the thesis is to analyze Johan Huizinga's image of America and place it in a European context by comparing it with what Menno ter Braak (1902-1940), Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) and José Ortega Y Gasset (1883-1955) have written about America. The conclusion drawn from the analysis and comparison is that Johan Huizinga had a relatively nuanced image of America in which both the negative and positive aspects were recognized. Huizinga disapproved of the developments in America that he thought would also occur in Europe, but he was careful to also point out original and positive American qualities. Huizinga's position in the cultural pessimism of the Interbellum is characterized as that of a sharp and careful observer.

Introduction

Strange: among us Europeans who were traveling together in America . . . there rose up repeatedly this pharisaical feeling: we all have something that you lack; we admire your strength but we do not envy you. Your instrument of civilization and progress, your big cities and your perfect organization, only make us nostalgic for what is old and quiet, and sometimes your life seems hardly to be worth living, not to speak of your future.¹

This passage is found in Johan Huizinga's (1872-1945) 1927 book of short reflections on American society, *Amerika lewend en denkend* (Life and Thought in America), which is based on the diary he kept during a study trip to the United States in 1926.² It encapsulates in a few sentences the Dutch historian's ambivalent attitude towards America: both admiring and disapproving. Moreover, the passage suggests that Huizinga is not entirely disinterested when looking at America; when he writes "your future", there is a sense that this might as well mean "our future".³ Clearly, America is seen here as a possible portent of the future of European civilization.

During the period in which this book was written, the interbellum between the two World Wars (1918-1939), many European intellectuals experienced a profound sense of crisis. The Great War was experienced as an earthquake which shattered all the certainties of the world before 1914. As Martin Kitchen puts it: "This was the great catastrophe, which contemporaries viewed with the horrified perplexity of primitive man faced with a volcanic eruption."⁴ The self-confident trust in the ideals of nineteenth-century bourgeois liberalism and the achievements of modernity was seriously questioned.⁵ The industrialized slaughter of the war had demonstrated of what horrors modern technology was capable, and this weakened the belief in progress in general.⁶ The First World War left in its wake an acute sense of loss.⁷ In Roland N. Stromberg's words: "the postwar generation was the 'lost generation.' Lost were faith and hope, belief

¹ Johan Huizinga, *Amerika lewend en denkend* (Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1926), 162.

² Carla du Pree, *Johan Huizinga en de bezeten wereld* (Leusden: ISVW Uitgevers, 2016), 113.

³ Rob Kroes, "America and the European Sense of History," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (Dec 1999): 1140.

⁴ Martin Kitchen, *Europe between the wars* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 1.

⁵ Ibid, 2.

⁶ Ibid, 2-3.

⁷ Roland N. Stromberg, *European Intellectual History Since 1789* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 241-242.

in progress, confidence in the civilization of the West.”⁸ New elements appeared on the horizon to fill the void. One of them is what cultural critics often derogatively called “the masses”. The Great War had shown how “the masses” of every social class were slaughtered. The Russian Revolution of 1917 had shown how “the masses” came to power. And now, with increasing democratization, “the masses” could find more ways to let their voices be heard.⁹ I put “the masses” in quotation marks to make it clear that it should certainly not be seen as an innocent, objective term in this context. For many conservative elites and intellectuals in this period, “the masses” had a negative connotation, and it signaled their disapproval and fear of the increasingly large share of the population that demanded a place in society.¹⁰ For many elites, this constituted a threat to their self-evident authority.¹¹ Ortega y Gasset gave voice to many of these sentiments in *La rebellion de las masas* (1930), in which he predicted a levelling of society once the elites could no longer give guidance to “the masses”.¹² Mass culture reached a large audience through the mass media of film, gramophone, and radio, which further fueled elites’ fear of a levelling, homogenization, and general deterioration of culture.¹³ Moreover, the rise of extreme-right “mass movements”, such as fascism in Italy and National-Socialism in Germany, indicated for what political purposes “the masses” might be used.¹⁴ It should be clear by now that “the masses” was not a scientific term, but a rhetorical abstraction by conservative elites, used to highlight their fears and criticisms.

Another new element postwar Europe had to cope with was the powerful presence of the United States on European soil, physically, economically, and culturally. As Rob Kroes writes: “the 1920s were unprecedented in the way that America forced itself upon the European consciousness . . . America’s intervention in the war, its armies stationed in Europe, and the startling advent of its mass culture in the following years make World War I a watershed.”¹⁵ In the Interbellum period, the “roaring twenties” spread over

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Du Pree, *Johan Huizinga*, 95-96.

¹⁰ Ibid, 96.

¹¹ Ibid, 103.

¹² Ibid, 96.

¹³ Ibid, 103.

¹⁴ Ibid, 97.

¹⁵ Rob Kroes, “Sense of History,” 1137.

Europe.¹⁶ Jazz music arrived with black soldiers in the American Expeditionary Force, but it became popular as a synonym for popular dance music in general.¹⁷ Hollywood movies established their dominance in European cinemas, and with this new medium, American values and lifestyles were also disseminated.¹⁸ And American dances also crossed the Atlantic to transform popular dance in Europe.¹⁹ According to Thomas J. Saunders, “America was clearly the outstanding source of transnational popular culture”.²⁰ But like “the masses”, the Americanization of Europe was not welcomed by everyone. Again, conservatives were prominent in these critiques, for instance when they disapproved of the frivolous and immoral nature of modern, American-influenced popular culture.²¹ The United States had presented itself on the European stage as a force that had to be reckoned with. Europe may have been dealing with a crisis of civilization, but in any case, “the United States had to be a constituent part of their reflections.”²²

This was not the first time in history that Europeans had to cope with and try to make sense of America. Kroes considers this specific relationship with America “a special chapter in the European history of ideas.”²³ In most cases, America is seen as a member of Western civilization that has somehow been cut adrift from the nations of Western Europe; a country both familiar and strange. The quest for the European observers of America has always been to discover the critical differences that account for this strangeness. However, almost never is the purpose solely to better understand America; the quest is never entirely disinterested. Most often the observations are part of a discussion on the impact that America may have on Europe.²⁴ Kroes calls this a “triangulation”, “in the sense that the reflection on America as a counterpoint to European conventions functions within a larger reflection on Europe’s history and destiny.”²⁵ Naturally, this was also the case during the interbellum period, when

¹⁶ Thomas J. Saunders, “The Jazz Age,” in *A Companion to Europe 1900-1945*, ed. Gordon Martel (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 347.

¹⁷ Ibid, 346-347.

¹⁸ Ibid, 347-348.

¹⁹ Ibid, 351-352.

²⁰ Ibid, 354.

²¹ Ibid, 344.

²² Kroes, “Sense of History,” 1137.

²³ Ibid, 1135.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

European culture seemed to be rapidly Americanizing.²⁶ Interwar commentators on America often believed that America provided the image of Europe's future. One only had to look at America to see what the destiny of European civilization was.²⁷ An important reservation is that these writers were often not speaking about the physical, geographical America, but rather about an "America" in quotation marks.²⁸ Kroes describes this as "a construct of the mind, a composite image based on the perception of dismal trends, which are then linked to America as the country and culture characteristically, but not uniquely, displaying them."²⁹ This "construct of the mind" is not a given entity, but something dependent on the mind in question, and the time and place in which its bearer lives. It follows that images of America may tell us more about the observer and his environment than about America itself.³⁰ If we take the context of the Interbellum period, and combine the sense of crisis with the great presence of the United States, it is clear how many cultural critics looked at America in this period: when they spoke of America, they were really commenting on the perceived decline of European culture

This thesis is about the observer of America that I introduced at the very start: the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945). Though probably best known for his classic of cultural history *Waning of the Middle Ages* (1918) and his theoretical work *Homo Ludens* (1938), Huizinga also acted as a public intellectual and cultural critic, especially from the 1930s onwards.³¹ In 1935, Huizinga's most important work of cultural criticism, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, was published. In the book, Huizinga warns against the decay of civilization. A paradoxical notion in this book is that cultural progress is often accompanied by a sense of decay and loss. The title of the book expresses this dilemma of modernity.³² But traces of these sentiments can already be found in Huizinga's books

²⁶ Ibid, 1137.

²⁷ Ibid, 1137-1138.

²⁸ Rob Kroes, "The great satan versus the evil empire. Anti-Americanism in the Netherlands," in *Anti-Americanism in Europe*, eds. Rob Kroes and Maarten van Rossem (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1986), 37.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ K. van Berkel, "Amerika als spiegel van de Europese cultuurgeschiedenis," in *Amerika in Europese ogen: Facetten van de Europese beeldvorming van het moderne Amerika*, ed. K. van Berkel (The Hague, SDU Uitgeverij, 1990), 7.

³¹ Du Pree, "Johan Huizinga," 118.

³² Ibid, 124-125.

about America. The first, *Mensch en menigte in Amerika* (Man and the Crowd in America), was published in 1918. This book is based on the lectures on American history Huizinga gave in the academic year 1917-1918.³³ In 1927, Huizinga's second work on America was published: *Amerika levend en denkend* (Life and Thought in America). On the surface, these works contain essays and small observations on American society. But many of the elements Huizinga observes in America return in his later criticism of European culture. When writing about America, Huizinga was already subtly commenting on developments occurring in Europe. Huizinga himself saw his works on America, in retrospect, as prelude to the works of cultural criticism he would later write.³⁴ This places Johan Huizinga in the tradition of using America as a counterpoint in a wider reflection on European culture. The aim of this thesis is to examine how Johan Huizinga looked at America, and to place his image of America in the context of the Dutch and European cultural criticism during the Interbellum period.

There exists a considerable historiography on Johan Huizinga, but his works on America have always remained underexposed. Léon Hanssen and Wessel Krul wrote their PhD's on Johan Huizinga (1996 and 1990, respectively).³⁵ Hanssens's dissertation hardly mentions America at all. Krul does include an essay on Huizinga's view of America, but he does not place it in a European context. The same applies to the only Huizinga biography until this day, published by Anton van der Lem in 1993.³⁶ Huizinga figures in several publications that are specifically about European images of America, but again, his image of America is studied here mostly in isolation.³⁷ Rob Kroes is certainly the academic who has written the most about Huizinga's image of America. He has quite extensively discussed European observations of America during the interwar

³³ Ibid, 111.

³⁴ Ibid, 113.

³⁵ Léon Hanssen, *Huizinga en de troost van de geschiedenis. Verbeelding en rede* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans, 1996); W.E. Krul, *Historicus tegen de tijd. Opstellen over leven en werk van J. Huizinga* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij Groningen, 1990).

³⁶ Anton van der Lem, *Johan Huizinga. Leven en werk in beelden & documenten* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Wereldbibliotheek, 1993).

³⁷ See for instance: Rob Kroes and Maarten van Rossem, eds. *Anti-Americanism in Europe* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1986); K. van Berkel, ed. *Amerika in Europese ogen: Facetten van de Europese beeldvorming van het moderne Amerika* (The Hague, SDU Uitgeverij, 1990)

years, but he never puts Huizinga's image of America in a comparative framework.³⁸ He does not examine in what aspects Huizinga's image might have differed from others, or in what way it stands out from a historical perspective.

The aim of this thesis is to fill this void. The central question of this thesis is: how did Johan Huizinga perceive America and how does his image of America compare with those of other European intellectuals during the Interbellum period? The underlying framework is the particular way of looking at America that I described above, whereby observations on America are also, directly or indirectly, comments on European society. Firstly, I will analyze how Huizinga looked at America in *Mensch en menigte in Amerika* and *Amerika levend en denkend*. Secondly, I will compare Huizinga's image of America with what Menno ter Braak (1902-1940), Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) and José Ortega Y Gasset (1883-1955) have written about America. Ter Braak and Huizinga were perhaps the most well-known Dutch intellectuals of the Interbellum period. This makes a comparison between the two an obvious choice. I have chosen Spengler and Ortega for a similar reason: they were perhaps the most important cultural critics in Europe during the Interbellum. In addition, Huizinga and Ortega knew each other personally, and Huizinga extensively reviewed Spengler's 1918 work *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West).³⁹ There are obvious connections between Huizinga and these three men, and this makes a comparison compelling. I believe that only through a comparative framework can Huizinga's image of America be properly placed in the context of the Interbellum in Europe. An exercise like this allows us to learn more about Huizinga's part in the European history of the idea of "America".

In the *first chapter*, I will further develop the theoretical framework of my analysis by clarifying the main motives that have, throughout history, played a role in Europeans' images of America. These motives will serve as the basis of the subsequent analysis. In the *second chapter*, I will analyze Johan Huizinga's image of America, examining how he used America to comment on European society. In the *third chapter*, I

³⁸ See for instance: Rob Kroes, "The Reception of American Films In The Netherlands, The Interwar Years," *American Studies International* 28, no 2 (1990): 37-51; ---, "America and Europe – A Clash of Imagined Communities," in *European Readings of American Popular Culture*, eds. John Dean and Jean-Paul Gabilliet (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 25-52; ---, "European Anti-Americanism: What's New?" *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 2 (2006): 417-431.

³⁹ Du Pree, "Johan Huizinga," 114-115, 239.

will compare Johan Huizinga's image of America with those of Menno ter Braak, Oswald Spengler and José Ortega y Gasset.

As a last notice, I wish to stress that I have used several Dutch primary sources. These have been translated, but these translations were either not available or inconvenient to use. Consequently, when I quote from these sources, I have used my own translations. I am solely responsible for any mistakes made in this effort.

1. The main motives in European observations of America

K. van Berkel writes that images of America are generally more about Europe than about America. A scholar who writes about American society will always in some way reveal what aspect of his own European culture is on his mind the most. Therefore, these images are often about an America imagined by the European intellectual, not about the real, physical America across the Atlantic.⁴⁰ Van Berkel discerns two main motives in these imagined Americas: primitivism and America as the country of the future.⁴¹ These motives, Van Berkel explains, show that America is used as a “projection screen” for discussions on European culture.⁴² America is a “mix of the strange and the familiar” that could be used to think about “the value and meaning of one’s own culture”.⁴³ In this way, ‘America’ has since its discovery functioned as “a mirror of European culture”.⁴⁴

The motive of primitivism has two sides. On the one hand, it is the belief that primitive people, because of their lack of culture, are happier than civilized Europeans.⁴⁵ Van Berkel gives the example of François-René de Chateaubriand’s 1901 novella *René*, in which the title character, a European boy, is jealous of the unspoiled society of the Native Americans.⁴⁶ Since the first settlement of the New World, people attributed good qualities and virtuousness to the primitive Native Americans. What made them virtuous was precisely their lack of culture.⁴⁷ During the Enlightenment, the “myth of the noble savage” was popular, which Europeans used to criticize their own society.⁴⁸ In the 19th century, when the idea of the “noble savage” declined in popularity, the same good qualities were transferred to white Americans. In these observations, Americans possess a youthful spirit and energy which “sickly” Europe often lacks. America is seen as primitive, but also the country where new beginnings are still possible. Europe, in contrast, is considered too civilized, burdened by rigid social hierarchies.⁴⁹

⁴⁰ K. van Berkel, “Amerika als spiegel,” 7.

⁴¹ Ibid, 11-12.

⁴² Ibid, 12.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 9-10.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 12-13.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 13-14.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 14-15.

The other side of the motive of primitivism is when the perceived lack of culture in America is not seen as a virtue, but as something negative. In this version of primitivism, a low level of civilization is linked to an immoral materialism.⁵⁰ This goes back to the ancient Indian empires of Middle and South America, where Europeans saw a population that possessed unspeakable riches but was also cannibalistic and barbaric in its practices.⁵¹ In the 19th century, criticisms of American greed, egoism, and materialism were widespread. In these views, Americans are unmannered and hypocritical. The conformity and tyranny of the majority in their society was also criticized.⁵² During the 20th century, critiques of the materialistic America increased in strength, because it was seen that European culture was increasingly Americanizing. American culture became a threat that could not be easily rejected.⁵³

The other main motive, America as the country of the future, is displayed in Alexis de Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835/1840). Tocqueville believed that in America he could witness the advanced implementation of democracy that would eventually also come to Europe.⁵⁴ In this motive, observers see in America what will also eventually occur in Europe.⁵⁵ This motive goes back to the ancient myth of the westward course of civilization. Not long after its discovery, America was seen as the place where the center of civilization would eventually gravitate towards.⁵⁶ During the 19th century, America was also discussed in terms of its political and cultural power. It was associated with industrialization and mechanization, but also with a levelling down of morals. It was a widespread assumption that the future would be for American culture.⁵⁷ After the First World War, when American popular culture rapidly spread over Europe, these thoughts seemed to come true. The response to this Americanization in the Interbellum was mixed, from outright rejection of American culture, to more weighed responses, and even positive reactions.⁵⁸ Thus, just as the motive of primitivism, the

⁵⁰ Ibid, 16-17.

⁵¹ Ibid, 17.

⁵² Ibid, 15-19.

⁵³ Ibid, 20.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 10-11.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 12.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 21-22.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 22-23.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 24.

motive of America as the country of the future also has a negative side, when the future observed in America is met with disapproval and rejection.

To summarize, Van Berkel gives us two main motives, both with a positive and a negative version. When it comes to the motive of primitivism, the Americans' perceived lack of culture can be seen as either a good thing or a bad thing. When it is seen as something positive, Americans are seen as young and free in spirit, still unspoiled by the burdens of civilization. When the Americans' lack of culture is viewed negatively, Americans are considered to be barbaric, rude, egoistic and materialistic. The motive of America as the country of the future also has these two sides. On the one hand, observers look at America's future hopefully if they wish Europe to be more like America. This is how Tocqueville looked at America when he witnessed the advanced democratization there. On the other hand, observers can look at America's future with fear and disapproval when they would not like European society to become mechanized, levelled, and overflowed with American popular culture.⁵⁹ Thus, what motive or motives someone chooses for his or her observations of America, depends on his or her position in debates about European culture. This makes these motives a useful basis for the analysis that will follow in the next chapters.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

2. Huizinga and his image of America

Huizinga's works on America

While Johan Huizinga only entered the public debate on the European crisis of culture in the 1930s, traces of his cultural criticism can be found in his earlier works. *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, which, as its title indicates, is about cultural decay in the 14th and 15th century, has been seen by some as an indirect expression of a critique on modern civilization.⁶⁰ *Mensch en Menigte in Amerika* (1918) was less implicit in its criticism, containing indirect comments on the development of European culture. This indicates that Huizinga already made his first forays into cultural criticism around 1918, amidst the wave of pessimistic commentaries that were published in the years after the First World War. The book is based on a series of lectures Huizinga gave in the academic year 1917-1918. The timing is telling; Huizinga had clearly observed the growing influence of the United States on the world stage after the First World War. Huizinga probably felt that this presence, which the Netherlands inevitably had to cope with, should be better understood.⁶¹ As he wrote in the preface to the first edition of *Mensch en Menigte*: “We know far too little about America.”⁶² Huizinga had not yet visited America himself, so he could not make use of first-hand experience. Instead, he relied on American primary sources and recent American literature. This was different for his second book on America, *Amerika levend en denkend*. Published in 1926, this collection of short observations was based on the diary Huizinga kept while visiting several American universities as part of a study trip.⁶³ This trip was financed and facilitated by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, an American fund that offered fellowships to European students, and of which Huizinga was in 1925 appointed as the Dutch representative.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Du Pree, “Johan Huizinga,” 63.

⁶¹ Ibid, 111-112

⁶² Johan Huizinga, *mensch en menigte in Amerika* (Haarlem: H. D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1928), V.

⁶³ Du Pree, “Johan Huizinga,” 111-113.

⁶⁴ W.E. Krul, “Moderne beschavingsgeschiedenis. Johan Huizinga over de Verenigde Staten,” in *Amerika in Europese ogen: Facetten van de Europese beeldvorming van het moderne Amerika*, ed. K. van Berkel (The Hague, SDU Uitgeverij, 1990), 95.

Huizinga's image of America

The motive of materialism is clearly discernable in Huizinga's writings on America. Huizinga asserts that "every political and cultural matter in the United States is fundamentally an economic one."⁶⁵ On the fresh soil of America, which, unlike Europe, is not burdened by old societal structures, "the economic factors operate with a freedom and immediacy unknown in European history."⁶⁶ For Huizinga, the economic factors in American society are clearly visible on the surface.⁶⁷ The forces of production can determine an entire historical process.⁶⁸ Huizinga clearly observes a strong preoccupation with economic matters in America, but there is no question of an outright rejection of this, as in the motive of the "barbaric materialist" type. Huizinga describes these processes from a certain distance and does not seem to connect them to developments in Europe.

This is different when Huizinga turns to the development in American society he laments the most: what he calls "the mechanization of community life." "Mechanization" is a key term in understanding Huizinga's critical view of America. He uses it to refer to the ramifications of the tendency in American society to use large organizations and technology to regulate life. Huizinga believes that human freedom is caught in these organizations.⁶⁹ "Every technical invention shackles human power as much as it frees it," he writes.⁷⁰ He means that every time people try to find the means to have more free control over their lives, the opposite often happens: the technologies and organizations that they invent start to develop a dynamic of their own, and to control and dictate their lives.⁷¹ And here, Huizinga clearly sees America as the country of the future. Huizinga believes that mechanization is an inevitable process in human history. "Without this mechanization there is no civilization," he declares.⁷² Thus, it will also develop in European civilization. Huizinga stresses this further when, in *Amerika levend en denkend*,

⁶⁵ *Mensch en menigte*, 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁰ *Levend en denkend*, 15.

⁷¹ *Mensch en menigte*, 126.

⁷² *Ibid.*

he writes that his narrative on mechanization was meant to sketch “the apparently inevitable development of contemporary civilization, America taken as the most complete example.”⁷³ Huizinga clearly believed that this process of mechanization would affect all of civilization, including Europe. America was simply the country where this process had developed the furthest. By pointing this out, Huizinga subtly took a position in the European debate on culture; one had to look at America to see the predicament of Europe. The motive of America as the country of the future is clearly discernible here.

Huizinga explains in detail how mechanization has affected every aspect of American society, one of them the economy. Here he explains how the railroad quickly became crucial to American economic growth. The railroads soon came under the control of big business. Large companies competed with each other, and the railroads became pawns in a financial game. The value of shares became more important than the real economic value of cargo. Thus, the railroad economy was mechanized inasmuch as it was subjected to the dictates of the financial market.⁷⁴ As Huizinga puts it: “A mechanical element has come into the entire function of the railroad, which in every respect forms a threat to culture.”⁷⁵ The other inventions that shortened distances in a crucial way, the telegraph and the telephone, had similar effects.⁷⁶ The rapidly developing technology was applied to the concentration and uniformization of economic production.⁷⁷ But this is problematic in Huizinga’s view, because the more human ingenuity and science is applied to the workings of an organization, the more the role of people as managers tends to disappear. On the surface, these managers seem to control the organization in freedom, but in truth they are directed by the dictates of the organization, the “machine”. Huizinga believes that his mechanical element becomes more dominant the more complex the economic system becomes.⁷⁸ The big trusts demonstrate this. In Huizinga’s view, the trusts have become independent, almost feudal forces that enslave the individual. And all of this is at the expense of the human, personal element.⁷⁹ Huizinga considers the Taylor-

⁷³ *Levend en denkend*, 15.

⁷⁴ *Mensch en menigte*, 67-70.

⁷⁵ *Mensch en Menigte*, 70.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 71-72.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 73-74.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 89-98.

System of scientific management to be the ultimate form of economic mechanization: man itself has been adapted to the machine.⁸⁰

In American political life, Huizinga also observes a strong process of mechanization. He asserts that the real political sentiment has disappeared from the big American parties. Instead, everything is meticulously and mechanically organized in preparation for the many elections.⁸¹ “The complexity of the system of appointment and election destroys the freedom of the civilian, instead of preserving it, as was intended,” Huizinga writes.⁸² Specialists and political bosses have become more important than powerless members of Congress. Everywhere, political machines led by bosses dominate the political stage. Huizinga sees the American political party as an oligarchy, led by a small number of officials and managers who have no true political qualities or skills. Rather, their value is determined by how well they fit into the composition of the party machine. Party strategy seems to have become more important than political ideals.⁸³ Thus, just as in the economic area, the human element has been subjected to the machine, which in this case is the political party. Huizinga also discerns commercialization and corruption in the parties. “Special interests” and large trusts seek to finance election campaigns and gain political influence. They lobby with Congress to try and influence policymaking to their own advantage. Parties depend on their financing and thus have to tolerate their influence. Political parties now had to take account of the business interests on which they depended for financing.⁸⁴ As Huizinga puts it, “big business has absorbed political life.”⁸⁵ The pure political principle has been banished from political life.⁸⁶ Thus, in the American political life, as in the economy, the role of the spontaneous and individual human element has been degraded, and everything falls under the dictates of the “machine”.

The mechanization of American cultural life is at the center of Huizinga’s observations of America. For Huizinga, the distributors of culture, especially the

⁸⁰ Ibid, 98-101.

⁸¹ Ibid, 110-111.

⁸² Ibid, 111.

⁸³ Ibid, 111-112.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 114-117.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 117.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 118.

newspaper and the cinema, “level and standardize the mind in unprecedented ways.”⁸⁷ Everything has to be easily understandable, democratic, and therefore uniform.⁸⁸ The newspaper provides the mind with a daily dose of easy information, which it digests in a passive way; it is mechanically stimulated. The intention is that the mind does not have to do any critical thinking for itself. Since this mechanical stimulus is applied to the entire population, a uniform mindset is cultivated, at the expense of personal or unique insight.⁸⁹ Huizinga goes as far as claiming that the newspaper performs the function of literature in American society. For him, it is the newspaper that cultivates a sense of spiritual cohesion among the population and presents them with a mirror of their culture.⁹⁰ But in Huizinga’s mind, this culture is one that has been levelled and standardized to a large degree. He finds the cinema guilty of having this same effect. The cinema, in Huizinga’s opinion, creates the illusion of understanding something by merely watching it, and therefore convinces people that there is no real critical thinking involved. Like the newspaper, and partly due to its technical limitations, the cinema portrays everything in a simplified, conventional style. Again, the reasoning is that everything needs to be understandable and democratic.⁹¹ But for Huizinga, this approach means that the cinema is engaged with in a passive way and “disables many areas of the mind”.⁹² It aims to deliver exactly what the audience in general desires, so its aesthetics necessarily remain limited and crude. It mechanically provides the experiences that satisfy the public’s taste, and in that way helps shape a new cultural norm that is imprinted onto society.⁹³ The entire population is made familiar with a common view on life, but again, for Huizinga this entails the levelling and standardization that he laments.⁹⁴ These effects are facilitated by the proliferation in American society of advertisements and slogans. In Huizinga’s view, the exaggerated advert-like writing style has been perfected in the United States.⁹⁵ Loud headlines should stimulate people and keep them interested and

⁸⁷ *Levend en denkend*, 16-17.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Mensch en menigte*, 119-120.

⁹⁰ *Levend en denkend*, 33.

⁹¹ *Mensch en menigte*, 121-122; *Levend en denkend*, 28.

⁹² *Levend en denkend*, 28

⁹³ *Mensch en Menigte*, 122.

⁹⁴ *Levend en denkend*, 28.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

curious.⁹⁶ News is selected for the romantic, picturesque story that can be told with it.⁹⁷ Huizinga believes that the reader is aware of these tactics, and that, as a result, he no longer takes articles seriously and only reads them superficially.⁹⁸ Advertisements, like the newspaper and the cinema, provide familiar and simplified expressions meant to be appealing to everyone.⁹⁹ The slogan also performs this function, by unifying the scattering of thoughts and tying them all to a short and provocative statement. Huizinga deplores this type of generalization; it abolishes nuance and constricts thought.¹⁰⁰ For him, it points to a “regression of culture.”¹⁰¹ In general, Huizinga observes a shift in American society where images, simpler and less time consuming, increasingly take over the function of text. Huizinga believes this leads to a weakening of thinking and concentration.¹⁰² Finally, Huizinga also observes effects of mechanization in the field of science in America. For instance, he is critical of systems of scientific classification, like the decimal system of registration, which limit the thinker’s freedom and intuition by introducing a mechanical element in the ordering of their thoughts. For Huizinga, this implies breaking natural cohesion in favor of scientific ordering.¹⁰³ Huizinga also regrets the fact that eugenics, the ultimate form of mechanization through which births are controlled, is gaining ground in the United States.¹⁰⁴ What runs through all of Huizinga’s observations on American culture, is a keen sense that a widespread levelling and standardization is taking place. Everything has to be simplified and flattened, but this denotes a regression of culture as a whole.

However, Huizinga contends that standardization is not just something that the industrial interests in America impose on the population, it is also what he calls a “cultural ideal”. In other words, Americans like conformity and homogeneity. They want to be similar to each other.¹⁰⁵ Here, Huizinga is not talking about an aspect of the general evolution of civilization, but about a characteristic that is specifically American. He no

⁹⁶ Ibid, 39-40.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 34-35.

⁹⁸ *Mensch en menigte*, 120-121.

⁹⁹ *Levend en denkend*, 43-44.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 52.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 53.

¹⁰² Ibid, 47-50.

¹⁰³ *Mensch en menigte*, 122-124.

¹⁰⁴ *Mensch en menigte*, 125-126.

¹⁰⁵ *Levend en denkend*, 21.

longer discusses what might await America, but what sets America apart from Europe. Huizinga connects this cultural ideal of conformity to a mentality in American life he calls the “herd instinct”; the people are tame and dependent, value conformity and the accepted opinion, and fear deviating from the “good” model.¹⁰⁶ Huizinga attributes this conventionalism not only to the conservative puritan piety at the root of American society, but also to its great cultural dependence on the motherland during the colonial period. He also mentions petty-bourgeois economic relationships, the pursuit of material prosperity, and the ideals of Enlightenment and democracy as American characteristics that have contributed to spiritual levelling, conventional uniformity and conformity to the law.¹⁰⁷ A high regard for common sense and an emphasis on political equality had, in Huizinga’s view, a levelling effect on American life which he calls “a solidarity of mediocrity.” It means that the Americans have a strong tendency toward finding consensus in all areas and rejecting everything that deviates from this. What is popular, easily understandable, and with immediate practical application – what is mediocre – is usually accepted. Huizinga argues that the mechanization of industry has contributed to this acceptance of mediocrity; since everything is manufactured on a large scale, so that most products only have one type, there is not much of a choice. Huizinga sees the strong churchliness of the American people as an important indicator of their conformity.¹⁰⁸ However, as in other areas, Huizinga is ambiguous here. Whereas “the masses” of the American population demonstrate this tame herd spirit of conformity, the American, when taken as an individual, actually displays a tough independence, originality, and passionate zeal that seem to stand in opposition to the herd spirit. Huizinga sees this original American mindset as the fruit of the independent development of American civilization, the result of the hard life of laboring and struggling with nature. Thus, while America may seem like a tame herd on the surface, Huizinga stresses that there is an powerful individualistic spirit in American culture that we should not ignore.¹⁰⁹

Huizinga’s tone is quite appreciatively and sometimes even admiring when he writes about the great idealism and trust in the future he observes in the American people.

¹⁰⁶ *Mensch en menigte*, 188.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 189-197.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 197-198.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 199-201.

And while the American patriotic ideal can seem hollow to outsiders due to its simplicity and tendency to generalize, Huizinga urge his readers not to denounce it too easily.¹¹⁰ He writes: “We who do not know the future, do not have the right to condemn America’s ideal. In that sense one should regard their idealism: calmly, and if possible, appreciatively.”¹¹¹ Huizinga finds the American people in general to be far more focused on the present and the future than on the past. Whereas Europe is burdened by the “old letters and old stone” of its past, and more inclined towards retrospection, Huizinga sees America walking lightly and optimistically into the future.¹¹² Here we can discern elements of the motive of primitivism. Huizinga perceives America’s lack of history and civilization as something positive; America is still free to plot its own course and is not impeded by a past that contains cumbersome societal structures. Huizinga seems to admire this particular aspect of the American mentality; its optimism for the future and believe in a better society tomorrow. Huizinga refers to this mentality as “this, here and soon”. It is a moral pragmatism aimed at finding workable solutions for societal ills.¹¹³ He connects this mentality to a belief in American society that everything exists in a constant state of rapid transition. Everything that does not work must be changed or remade. The environment has to be reshaped in order to change the people themselves.¹¹⁴ Huizinga characterizes this pragmatic experimentalism and opportunism as “revolutionary”, but explicitly distinguishes it from Revolution with a capital R. In Huizinga’s view, Americans want nothing to do with the ideologically driven kind of revolution he associates with Russia. Instead, he sees them as revolutionary in that they are aware of the constant change around them and always courageously striving for new and better methods and forms to replace the problematic and obsolete ones.¹¹⁵ Huizinga believes that science is the means for this moral pragmatism to actually improve American society; understanding society in all its aspects is a precondition to healing its ills. He sees in America also a great trust in technology as a problem solver, as a means to do everything better, faster, and more efficiently. Americans, in Huizinga’s view, want to

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 181-182.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 182.

¹¹² Ibid, 214-215.

¹¹³ Ibid, 214-216.

¹¹⁴ *Levend en denkend*, 146.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 147-8.

control nature and society as completely as possible, so that they can regulate and organize all domains of social and economic life. They do this not only to increase material wealth, but also to shape a better world.¹¹⁶ Huizinga is enthusiastic about the strong connection in America between scientific thought and social advancement, which he does not see in Europe.¹¹⁷ For him, “a spark burns [in America, red] that may still promise a new glow.”¹¹⁸ Spengler had missed this spark when he predicted “the great chilling of culture.”¹¹⁹ Huizinga sees in America’s moral pragmatism the evolution of the humanity ideals of the Enlightenment. In America, he argues, there has never been a great backlash to the Enlightenment like in Europe. Therefore, the Enlightenment continues to develop undisturbed and fruitfully there.¹²⁰

Huizinga is quite critical of American literature and art. America has long tried to be less dependent on English culture and develop an original American literature, but Huizinga sees an American culture that is still dominated by English productions.¹²¹ He thinks that American art has good and correct form, but immediately and paradoxically adds that this is the problem. For him, this correctness indicates lack of feeling and originality. Huizinga explains how form takes centuries to develop. America still lacks a long cultural tradition and therefore its art has not yet developed original forms. The art is still based on imitation. And literature is still lacking in the big genres such as drama.¹²² But while Huizinga believes that American literature on the whole has not yet contributed a lot to world civilization, he does think that it has produced some very important writers, such as Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹²³

All of this taken together, what is most striking is Huizinga’s ambivalent attitude towards America. I already alluded to this at the start of the introduction of this thesis. The passage “we admire you, but we do not envy you” speaks of all of Huizinga’s writings on America. Huizinga admires America’s fresh and original mindset, its passionate optimism

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 133-134.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 85-87.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 87.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 219-220.

¹²⁰ *Mensch en menigte*, 214-220.

¹²¹ *Mensch en menigte*, 208.

¹²² Ibid, 209-211.

¹²³ Ibid, 207-208.

for the future and idealism, and its moral pragmatism to continually find improvements that will benefit society. The motive of primitivism is visible here: because America does not have a long and burdensome past like Europe, it can still look at the future with optimism. And even though Huizinga observes an inferior literature in America, he generally seems to believe that America's lack of civilization is what lends it the aspects he appreciates the most.

On the other hand, Huizinga does not envy America when he sees how much society there is organized by economic principles, and how far mechanization has developed there, standardizing and levelling large portions of society. Here, Huizinga looks in anxiety at America as the country of the future. He believes that Europe awaits the same predicament. What is interesting is that, in these more negative musings, Huizinga considers America further developed than Europe on the scale of civilization. That is why it displays those processes that have still to evolve in Europe. Huizinga admires in America what Europe has already lost, but he does not envy what America still has to give.

In addition, Huizinga displays a willingness to maintain a critical distance when observing America, and to not limit himself to those aspects of American society that have direct ramifications for Europe. When he discusses Americans' materialism, herd spirit and the mentality of "this, here and soon," he acknowledges that these are typically American characteristics.

All of these factors make up a nuanced image of America, with attention to both its negative and positive sides. Huizinga's position in the European crisis of civilization is one of drawing people's attention to the negative processes that will reach Europe, but also stressing that America should be critically observed without prejudice.

3. Huizinga's view in comparison

Huizinga and Menno ter Braak

Ter Braak frequently wrote about movies, and here, there are many parallels between him and Huizinga. In his 1929 book *Cinema militans*, Ter Braak typifies film as something “which the masses know and idolize.”¹²⁴ He believes that “[m]oviegoing is still the primitive evasion of reality and not the urge towards the reality in the beautiful order, the art.”¹²⁵ Huizinga also thought that watching movies leads people away from understanding reality. It was nothing more than a passive occupation, a mechanical stimulus which does not make people understand reality. Ter Braak calls American film “negative community art.”¹²⁶ Ter Braak echoes Huizinga when he writes that the “typically ‘communal’ of the American movie is the levelling of contents.”¹²⁷ The American film industry, for Ter Braak, is “adapted to the vulgar taste” and “is the form of a democratic, levelling society.”¹²⁸ Huizinga also saw this connection between the democratic nature of American society and the need to have a standardized aesthetic in cinema.

When writing about America, Ter Braak usually invokes the term “Americanism”. In a 1930 article on films, Ter Braak defines “Americanism” as “a mentality, a mindset, which in these matters [concerning film, etc.] happens to express itself in celluloid.”¹²⁹ And it refers to “a certain trend in film production, which is both nationally and internationally levelling.”¹³⁰ But Ter Braak stresses that it is a broad term which is not restricted to movies. “Americanism” is standardization, lack of originality, clichés, serving up banal sentimentality that caters to the common public’s taste.¹³¹ In an earlier article for the student periodical *Propria Cures* from 1925, titled “Europe for the Europeans!”, Ter Braak vehemently rejected “Americanism”. He writes: “Americanism

¹²⁴ Menno Ter Braak, *Cinema Militans* (Utrecht: De Gemeenschap, 1929), 13, http://www.mennoterbraak.nl/titels/titel.php?id=braa002cine01&druk_id=braa002cine01&o=tekst_1.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 59.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 60.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 77.

¹²⁹ Menno ter Braak, “‘Amerikanisme’ in de filmwereld,” *De Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, February 15, 1930, http://www.mennoterbraak.nl/tekst/braa002nrca01_01/braa002nrca01_01_0002.php.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

turns man into an aimless machine ... into a petrol speculator ... into a worn-down coin. It permeates everything, grinds everything down, corrupts everything to the core; ... all of culture.”¹³² This shows that Ter Braak associated “Americanism” with both mechanization and materialism. He feared that a process of Americanization would bring this mindset across the Atlantic and called for a European defense against this “Americanism” that he so deplors.¹³³ But in the 1930 article, he admits that this mentality has already spread over Europe, losing its specific American characteristics. “Americanism” was originally primarily associated with America, but that now it no longer had a specific locale.¹³⁴ In his 1928 article “Waarom Ik ‘Amerika afwijst” (Why I reject ‘America’), there is a sentiment that the differences between Europeanism and Americanism are fading. Ter Braak claims that Europe is often more like America than America itself, and the other way around.¹³⁵

Ter Braak and Huizinga shared a disapproval of the processes of mechanization, levelling and standardization. But while Huizinga saw these processes as constituents of the general evolution of civilization, Ter Braak associated them primarily with “Americanism”. He did put quotation marks around the term and he was astute enough to realize that these aspects did not exclusively manifest in America itself. But nevertheless, America for Ter Braak stood symbolic for the developments he disapproved of. Huizinga had a more nuanced view and was able to find positive aspects in American culture.

Huizinga and Oswald Spengler

Spengler talks of America almost solely in terms of the negative motive of the barbaric materialist. He typifies America as “a boundless field and a population of trappers, drifting from town to town in the dollar-hunt, unscrupulous and dissolute”.¹³⁶ America’s materialism for Spengler means that it lacks spirit: “dollars must not be taken to

¹³² Menno ter Braak, “Europa voor de European,” *Propria Cures*, February 21, 1925, http://www.mennoterbraak.nl/tekst/braa002prop01_01/braa002prop01_01_0091.php.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ter Braak “‘Amerikamisme.’”

¹³⁵ Menno ter Braak, “Waarom ik ‘Amerika’ afwijst,” *De Vrije Bladen*. 1928, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/braa002verz01_01/braa002verz01_01_0015.php.

¹³⁶ Oswald Spengler, *The Hour of Decision*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (London: George and Unwin Ltd, 1934), 67, <https://ia801609.us.archive.org/8/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.503389/2015.503389.hour-of.pdf>.

represent the spiritual strength of the people to whom they belong” and “business intelligence” should not be confused with “spirit and mind.”¹³⁷ American life for Spengler lacks depth, “all the more because it contains nothing of that element of historic tragedy, of great destiny, that has widened and chastened the soul of Western peoples through the centuries.”¹³⁸ Like Huizinga, Spengler observes a process of standardization in America, but for him it has taken a far more dramatic form. He contends that the entire American cultural life is dictated, so that Americans have no choice in what food to eat, novels to read, and dances to dance. He even compares America explicitly to Bolshevik Russia.¹³⁹ Spengler goes as far as distinguishing “a standardized type of American”.¹⁴⁰ Any criticism of this “type” is publicly condemned.¹⁴¹ Like Huizinga, Spengler points out the dominance of trusts in American economic life, and the consequent standardization and “soulless mechanization”, but Spengler is far more dramatic when he sees this dominance as “an almost Russian form of State socialism or State capitalism.”¹⁴² The trusts “are the real lords of the land”.¹⁴³ Huizinga agrees that the trusts dominate economic life in America, but does not go as far as making comparisons with Russia. “Is the United States a power with a future?” Spengler asks.¹⁴⁴ From the general tone of his observations on America, he does not seem to have much faith in it. Spengler allows that America has “become a leading element in international politics, but he believes that the state will disintegrate if fails to “learn to think and act internally and externally in accordance with a State policy”.¹⁴⁵ Spengler doubts whether the “Yankee” is up to this task. “Does he stand for an indestructible kind of life or is he only a *fashion* in physical, mental, and moral clothing?” he asks.¹⁴⁶ Spengler clearly seems to tend towards the latter option.

Spengler exaggerates all of the negative aspects Huizinga observes in America, and is far less nuanced than the Dutch historian. He is unable to find any positive aspects

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 68

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 67.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 69.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

in American society. Furthermore, Spengler seems to have no use for America as a counterpoint to Europe. He already doubts whether America has a future at all, so it is unlikely that he believed that America displayed the future of Europe.

Huizinga and José Ortega y Gasset

Ortega makes the point that no Americanization has occurred in the recent past. America may be “the paradise of the masses”, but according to Ortega, the rise of “the masses” in Europe has occurred for internal reasons.¹⁴⁷ He sees it as nothing more than a coincidence that this development coincides with the significant place that “the masses” have in American society.¹⁴⁸ Because of this similarity, Ortega argues, Europeans and Americans better understand each other. America has not influenced or Americanized Europe, but both have levelled; Europeans and Americans have become more similar to each other.¹⁴⁹

Ortega disagrees with the notion that a “practical and technicist conception of life” constitutes the essence of America.¹⁵⁰ Rather, he believes Europe invented technicism.¹⁵¹ For Ortega, America is “as all colonies are, a rejuvenescence of old races, in particular of Europe.”¹⁵² This suggests that Ortega, unlike Huizinga, did not observe an unique, original mentality in America.

In Ortega’s view, America was not the country of the future, but had just started its history.¹⁵³ It had not suffered yet and it still had to undergo many transformations, even those “quite opposed to the technical and the practical.”¹⁵⁴ Ortega calls America “a primitive people camouflaged behind the latest inventions.”¹⁵⁵

Both Ortega and Huizinga look at processes on both sides of the Atlantic separately, but where Huizinga sees these processes as part of the same civilizational development, Ortega calls any similarities between them coincidences. And whereas

¹⁴⁷ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1932), 25, 116, <https://ia800204.us.archive.org/32/items/TheRevoltOfTheMassesJoseOrtegaYGasset/Philosophy%20-%20The%20Revolt%20of%20the%20Masses%20-%20Ortega%20y%20Gasset%20Jose.pdf>.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 25.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 26.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 138.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid, 139.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Huizinga thought that he could see the future development of Europe in America, Ortega considered it a pointless exercise to see America as the country of the future.

Conclusion

The central question of this thesis was: how did Johan Huizinga perceive America and how does his image of America compare with those of other European intellectuals during the Interbellum period? This question was examined through the lens of a theoretical framework in which European commentators do not look at America disinterestedly. America has often functioned as a kind of mirror to Europe, and as such, observations on America have often been thinly disguised commentaries on developments in Europe. Several motives could be employed to 'make use' of America in these commentaries. In this thesis, the focus was on the motives of primitivism and America as the country of the future. The use that observers make of these motives determines their position in European debates. This thesis centered around the debates on the crisis of civilization during the Interbellum.

Johan Huizinga perceived America in an ambivalent way. He admired those aspects that were informed by the primitive and youthful elements of America, which set the country apart from Europe. Huizinga particularly appreciated the originality, optimistic energy, pragmatism, and tendency to improve society that he observed in the American people. On the other side of the coin, he observed a herd instinct of conformity and dependence, but he stressed that this should not detract from the positive qualities.

Huizinga perceived America with disapproval when he looked at the highly developed mechanization taking place there. He saw this leading to a strong levelling, standardization and uniformization of society, which he connected to a general regression of culture. Here, Huizinga looked at America as a portent of the future of Europe. He believed that these processes would also occur in Europe, and here we see the elements of cultural criticism in Huizinga's works on America.

These different factors make Johan Huizinga's image of America a nuanced one. Huizinga was astute enough to observe the negative developments in America but maintained enough critical distance to acknowledge the positive aspects of American society.

A comparison between Huizinga's image of America and those of Menno ter Braak, Oswald Spengler, and José Ortega y Gasset substantiated this evaluation of Huizinga's perception of America. Especially the comparisons with Ter Braak and

Spengler illustrated that Huizinga had a more nuanced view of America. Huizinga observed certain developments in society that he lamented, but he did not lay the sole blame for these developments on America. Ter Braak, on the other hand, was more accusatory when he used the codeword “Americanism” to summarize all of his complaints of society. Spengler and Ortega believed that America was not ready to be the country of the future and were unable to make use of America in their commentaries on Europe.

I am aware that these comparisons are limited, and very much insufficient to make sweeping general statements. But I believe that they have helped to better understand both Huizinga’s thoughts on America and his cultural criticism. Of course, further research is necessary. For instance, a comparison between Huizinga’s image of America and the attitudes towards America of the general (Dutch) population can give a new dimension to the themes that I have merely touched here.

What can, for now, be concluded about Huizinga’s position in the cultural pessimism of the Interbellum? I would argue that Huizinga was both a sharp and a careful observer. He sharply warned the Europeans of the processes that were already on display in America, but he was careful enough not to demonize America for them.

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