

America as a symptom? Johan Huizinga's Declinist Tribulations of American Culture and Civilization

Gabriel C. Gherasim

Abstract: The Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga published two books about the United States, *Men and the Masses in America* (1918) and *America: A Dutch Historian's Vision, from Afar and Near* (1927), respectively. While his first book epitomized a widespread interest of the Dutch intelligentsia and media towards the United States in the troubling context of the first World War, unveiling the overall changing perceptions about the New World, the second book was the reflective output of Huizinga's visit to the United States between April 14 and June 19, 1926. In full acknowledgement of the western decline, Huizinga's apprehensive entanglement with the New World – far from being frugal or irresponsible – was highly consistent with finger pointing America as the hamper of cultural frailties and decadence. The present study attempts to elucidate on Huizinga's caustic and pessimistic narrative about the United States from a three-folded perspective. Firstly, Huizinga's tirade is explained within the framework of his epistemological and methodological thinking, akin to historical formalism. Secondly, the present investigation argues that the United States stood for Huizinga's pretext of turning from his austere devotion to cultural history towards a more public posture in cultural criticism. Thirdly, both historical formalism and cultural criticism in Huizinga had fomented his unaltered views on the United States as a symptom of western cultural decline.

Keywords: Johan Huizinga, the United States, historical formalism, cultural history, cultural criticism, pessimism.

Bio: Gabriel C. Gherasim is lecturer at the Department of International Relations and German Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. He holds a PhD in philosophy, an MA in cultural studies, and a BA in political science. He published two books dedicated to the American philosopher Arthur C. Danto's analytic philosophy and aesthetics and more than 50 articles in national and international academic journals. His last book *Americanisms: An Inquiry into the Development of Political Ideologies in the USA* stands for a thorough investigation of American political ideologies in their historical development. He is member of the International Exchange Alumni (US Department of State, Washington DC), and member of the European and Romanian Association of American Studies.

E-mail: gabriel.gherasim@ubbcluj.ro

America as a symptom? Johan Huizinga's Declinist Tribulations of American Culture and Civilization

Gabriel C. Gherasim

Preamble to What Prompted Huizinga's Anti-American Tirades

Any attempt to consistently capture and contextualize the profound meanings of the Dutch intellectual Johan Huizinga's comprehensive ruminations on Western culture is a risky adventure. Critical depictions speak about interpenetrating layers of personalities, including the "man of letters, art critic, immensely accurate scholar, philologist, historian, philosopher of culture, a somewhat solemn and withdrawn professor and a playful mocker, an innovator and a conservative, a rationalist and a mystic" (Kossmann 1973, 225). The inner conflicts of an old-style erudite are instantiations of his preferences towards political cosmopolitanism, internationalism, pacifism, and legalism (Rydin 2022, 161), while Huizinga's intellectual and ideological inclinations undoubtedly lean towards Christian humanism, Eurocentrism, and conservatism (Rydin 2022, 26). Mostly appraised and criticized as outstanding cultural historian of western civilization in Europe¹, Johan Huizinga came to considering the United States as the most recent occurrence of the Western world rather under inauspicious circumstances. The economic boom of America at the turn of the twentieth century, the emerging status of the US as a global power, the death of his wife in 1914, the outburst of the first world war the same year and the American entry in the war in 1917, juxtaposed to signs of revolutionary upheavals and totalitarian proclivities in Europe prompted Huizinga's anxieties, insecurity, melancholia, and nostalgia towards the glorious European past and, overall, a sweeping state of pessimism regarding the future of the western world. Deeply troubled and confused, at odds with the political, economic, and daily-life realities of his time, Huizinga lucidly committed himself to searching for holistic explanations and diagnoses, and relentlessly launched diatribes of an overwhelming state of cultural decay in the western world. In full acknowledgement of the western decline, Huizinga's apprehensive entanglement with the New World – far from being frugal or irresponsible – was highly consistent with finger pointing America as the hamper of cultural frailties and decadence.

The resulting works out of Huizinga's immersion into the examination of American life conditions as symptomatic of western decline were *Men and the Masses in America* (1918) and *America: A Dutch Historian's Vision, from Afar and Near* (1927). While his first book epitomized a widespread interest of the Dutch intelligentsia and media towards the United States in the troubling context of the first world war, unveiling the overall changing perceptions about the New World, the second book was the reflective output of Huizinga's visit to the United States between April 14 and June 19, 1926. Huizinga's steady concerns about the interpretation of the United States in line with his formal epistemic assumptions – which still echoed in a later work, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (1936) – had started with his proposal to deliver an academic course on US history at the University of Leiden, during the academic year 1917-1918. Six years later, prompted by a sweeping interest about the American history and culture, a summer school for American students debuted at the University of Leiden; mirroring the exchange impulses between the United States and the Netherlands, Columbia University established its first academic chair of Dutch history, culture and ideas in the mid-1920s (Kammen 1982, 208). Moreover, Huizinga's only visit to the United States came out of fruitful academic cooperation

¹ Huizinga's cardinal works about western culture and civilization in Europe are, chronologically, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919), *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* (1924), and *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1938).

between the two nations: facilitated by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, Huizinga travelled to the United States in 1926 as a representative figure of a comprehensive program in cultural diplomacy and international cooperation aiming to “expand the international exchange of students” (Rydin 2022, 120), alongside a gallery of leading scholars and public intellectuals, such as Marcel Mauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Luigi Einaudi. Till the end of his life in 1945, Huizinga kept a vigorous curiosity regarding the United States, even if the aforementioned visit did not impress him much (Kammen 1982, 223). For example, Huizinga insisted to resume his earlier preoccupation with American history by delivering a new course in the academic year 1940-1941, followed by a communication on the United States at the Netherlands Academy of Sciences (Kammen 1982, 212-213).

The present study attempts to elucidate on Huizinga’s caustic and pessimistic narrative about the United States from a three-folded perspective. Firstly, Huizinga’s tirade is explained within the framework of his epistemological and methodological thinking, akin to historical formalism. Secondly, the present investigation argues that the United States stood for Huizinga’s pretext of turning from his austere devotion to cultural history towards a more public posture in cultural criticism. Thirdly, both historical formalism and cultural criticism in Huizinga had fomented his unaltered views on the United States as a symptom of western cultural decline.

Setting the Stage: Huizinga’s Peculiar Historiography about the Western World

In his examinations and diagnoses of western culture and civilization, Huizinga did not profess a particular interest towards the United States. Circumstantially, under the pressure of the first world war cataclysm, Huizinga had started to wonder if the new energies and historical vitality of the United States could be grasped as the utmost characteristic for the status of western culture and civilization. More specifically, Huizinga directed his effort towards i) attempting to understand the role and impact of the United States in the context of his holistic understanding of the western world, and ii) searching to include the United States’ culture and civilization within the historical schematism of his morphological explanation. Even if Huizinga has been constantly criticized for his unconventional and non-scientific approach to history, his inquiries ultimately rest upon a genuine methodological concern. In line with his formal understanding of history and the rejection of positivist histories professed by ‘mainstream’ historians, Huizinga’s steady concerns in historiography were consistent with the cultural interpretation of history, in search of the form, the spirit, the mindset, and the vision specific to a historical age. Accordingly, Huizinga always looked for cultural homogeneity (be it constructed out of contrasts and antinomies), forms and common stylistic patterns, to the detriment of causal explanations and compartmentalization of historical knowledge. In context, as Huizinga attempted “to medievalize the Italian Renaissance” (Krul 1997, 368) in one of his most famous works, the same he did when questioning about the possibility of ‘Americanizing’ the early twentieth century western culture and civilization. The vocabulary of ‘professional’ historians had rarely used such methodologically flawed approaches: in the eyes of Huizinga’s detractors, the Dutch historian rather worked with visions and intuitions to the detriment of scientifically tailored historical hypotheses (Kossmann 1973, 231).

Huizinga’s morphological interpretation of historical data is not merely restricted to a form versus content investigation; his aesthetic moulding of the past point to valuable aristocratic mentalities and behaviours, cultural patterns and styles, human exemplary acts of dignity and honour, artistic depictions of apparent contradictions and discontinuities, life forms, the imaginary and the fictional, and even the interplay of irrational and mystic forces that have shaped the master narrative of western history (Huizinga 1936, 39). His methodological formalism points to a morphological interpretation of western ‘greatness’, beyond the oversimplistic dichotomies of reason versus passion, individual versus community, or art versus society (Weintraub 1966, 208-246), rendering his formalism more complex than antinomic schematism. The modern history of the United States not only disturbed Huizinga but was also

converted in a kind of moral dilemma for the Dutch historian. The driving question of his scholarly concern with the history of the United States was how to integrate its apparent ‘formlessness’ into the schematic formalism of cogent historical writing; specifically, Huizinga aimed to discover those formal schemes that could structure the narratives of understanding the American historical past. Moreover, mostly in disdain for the historical present and in aversion towards the radicalism of totalitarian cultures in Europe (fascism, Nazism, Marxism), Huizinga forcibly attempted to render the US liberal and capitalist model of civilization as the chief explanatory model for the continuity of the western master narrative. Even if Huizinga’s posterity among American historians has remained feeble, his morphological investigation of the United States proved inspirational for the fields of cultural history, literary historicism and cultural studies in North America (Jardine 2015, 86-88). Moreover, more recent assessments of Huizinga’s methodology reveal a rather phenomenological and intentional approach and minimize the morphological character of his research (McDonald 2019, 249-253). Pushing for his compelling intellectual goals, Huizinga remained rather indifferent to accusations of relativism: “what is lacking in Huizinga is precisely a rigorous methodological awareness of how one should construct a morphology. The more such a morphology is lacking, the more Huizinga’s morphology becomes, as one might expect, a fresco that ostentatiously displays its own interconnections, and not a structure” (Eco 2024, 6).

Huizinga’s idea of imposing form upon the past (Kelley 2003, 323) is neither unique, nor extravagant; according to Peter Burke (2010), Huizinga and the German historian of the Italian Renaissance, Jacob Burckhardt, are the ‘classics’ of cultural history and methodological formalism, and both shared anguish and disgust towards the historical times they lived in (Burke 1986, 25). Huizinga’s formalism in (cultural) historiography was understood as a form of escapism and estrangement from the life conditions of his time, leading to the intentional repudiation of economic, history phenomena and (inter)national power politics as professed by ‘official histories’. The tradition of intellectuals who embraced the hermeneutical and narrativist stances of historical writing encapsulates German historians (Windelband, Rickert, Dilthey, Cassirer) (Huizinga 1963), the historians of the French school of Annales (Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Georges Duby, Jacques Le Goff) (Hugenholtz 1973, 102; Midgley 2012, 116-117), and even Anglo-American historians (Robin G. Collingwood, Hayden White), usually at odds with morphological speculativism in historiography. The discontent of all these historians with scientific positivism, naturalism, and evolutionary approaches in historiography was the trademark of their intellectual dissidence.

In order to pursue genuine historical writing, Huizinga truly believed in the prevarication of political present realities as explanatory for something that goes beyond politics as such. Fundamentally apolitical, cultural historiography stood as that something deemed worthy of explaining the deep state of crisis in the western world. Unlike the German political philosopher, Carl Schmitt, who understood the state of crisis in terms of old-fashioned power politics and the weaknesses of post-world war I liberal democracies (Mul 2023, 6-7), Huizinga denied his times’ political and economic factors the explanatory force regarding the state of decline in the West. According to the Dutch cultural historian, meaningful morphological interpretation of the US history could be applied only until the Civil War era, rendering the post-1865 historical facts and developments the status of ‘puerilism;’ in addition, he was scornful towards nineteenth century Russia, tsarism, pan-Slavism, Marxism and Freudism alike, not to mention the rising totalitarian movements of fascism and Nazism (Bžoch 2021; Gombrich 1973a). Deep in his heart, Huizinga remained a disillusioned and nostalgic conservative about the glorious past of Western civilization, strongly supporting “federalism, European cooperation, multilingualism and civil society” (Gosselink 2022, 56) and unremittingly defending the *pacta sunt servanda* principle in international relations, based on respect for international law/ rules, “honor, decency, and good form” (Huizinga 1949, 208).

‘Good form’ in Huizinga was about preserving a certain ethos and interpretive morphological patterns regarding what was truly meaningful about the substantial progress of

the western civilization. At the end of the twentieth century's second decade, in the two works Huizinga published – *Men and the Masses in America* and *The Waning of the Middle Ages* – it was precisely uncertainty and skepticism that informed the Dutch historian's hesitation about assessing US history as the narrative prolongation of western culture and civilization. At the end of 1917-1918 US history lectures, readings and contemplation, Huizinga postulated that vulgarity, commercialism, mechanization, progress and technology in America contradicted the traditional European “organic cohesion of cultural forms and style” (Kroes 1998, 9), so that the Dutch intellectual came to conclude about the irrepressible ‘American formlessness’ within the master narrative of western culture and civilization. This type of Eurocentrism grounded on intellectual arrogance and moral superiority was a widespread trend among anti-American intellectuals in Europe who deplored the cultural decadence of the New World, and Huizinga was no exception: “American history became urgent to Huizinga only when its trajectory symbolized Europe's historical demise” (Rydin 2022, 236). Even if Huizinga had come to identify the end of the Middle Ages with the discovery of America (Huizinga 1959, 69, 254), despite his epistemic distrust in clear-cut ruptures and discontinuities, his cardinal disbelief about the reviving potential of US civilizational resources rather stemmed from aesthetic considerations. Huizinga's confusing perceptions about the lack of “particular beauty of line or color in the story of the thirteen separate colonies” (Huizinga 1943, 219) at the very beginnings of US history blends with following a certain interpretation in the genealogy of ideas (whereby Huizinga seizes an unconvincing rebuttal of the Enlightenment in the United States) (Huizinga 1972, 179-180) and with the acknowledgement of a ‘changing form’ regarding the inexpressive use of quantitative (versus cultural) imagination in America (Huizinga 1943, 223). Moreover, Huizinga's cognitive dissonance about the United States and its disparities with Europe could have been generated by his own triangular method of investigation: Huizinga immersed into the study of US history not as a professional historian properly, but as an intellectual haunted by both European and Dutch histories (Kroes 1998, 5). Neither the daily diary Huizinga kept during his journey to the United States in 1926, nor the correspondence with outstanding historians and intellectuals in the United States seemed to have contributed to the clarification of his perfunctory state of gloominess about the United States.

The first volume consisting of the vast correspondence of Huizinga between 1894 and 1924, hosted by the University of Leiden digital collections², shed a light upon the sources Huizinga used to concoct his rather holistic view about the United States. Among his favourite authors, one could include American historians Frederic Jackson Turner and Charles Beard: while Turner's frontier thesis inspired Huizinga's interpretation of American history as a useful methodological tool (Huizinga 1989, 250-251), the encounter of the Dutch cultural historian with the writings of Beard proved informative regarding the understanding of American historical development as the economic domination of American big businesses over political elites and its impact upon the emergence of American imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century (Kammen 1982, 206). A letter addressed by the US Legation to Huizinga in Leiden, dated August 16, 1918, asking the Dutch scholar to teach US history classes to American soldiers in English or the series of letters addressed by Charles Scribner's book editor Edward W. Bok in attempting to initiate a collection of books dedicated to ‘Great Hollanders’, prompting Huizinga's commitment to contribute with his *Erasmus* (Huizinga 1989), showcase a certain recognition of Huizinga in the United States, despite his dispositional and rather negativistic outlooks. The mixed reception of Huizinga in the United States is probably the result of both his complicated cultural pessimism and the misplaced interpretation of his mindset by American historians: a case in point is the erroneous reception of Huizinga's pessimistic and resigning maturity work *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (1935) as leftist and collectivist, in line with the 1930s widespread New Deal criticism in the United States (Quagliani 2019, 183-186).

² <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/view/item/2144092>.

Turning the heat up: Huizinga's turn from cultural history to cultural criticism

The methodologies and vocabularies of professional historians, derived from their scientific engagement with the practice of historiography, had not informed Huizinga's own goals in the field. Predominantly political, economic and military, the positivist approaches of scientific historiography opted for naturalistic methods of factual description in line with the practices of natural sciences. The abandonment of speculation and teleology in history rendered the method of interpretation sterile and rated history's preoccupation with the realm of the human spirit secondary. Huizinga objected to this kind of 'scientific' positivism by delving into a distinct type of investigation which he called 'cultural history' (Huizinga 1959, 17-76). Instead of a prevailing focus on political and economic matters, cultural historiography offers a broader perspective in the form of a holistic synopsis on old civilizational values, based on concurrent perspectives brought by anthropology and history, literature and the arts, rationalism and irrationalism alike (i.e., the study of mentalities alongside magic, rituals and beliefs). The preference for interpretation to the detriment of description, for genealogies of ideas and mythologies to the detriment of merely archival inventory of facts and data guided Huizinga to adopt a dissident 'non-scientific', 'non-evolutionary' and 'non-psychological' stance in historiography, elevating him to the status of 'critic of civilization' (Gombrich 1973a, 276; Gombrich 1973b, 138-140). The challenges of naturalism, scientism and the quantitative had posed serious troubles to Huizinga in his attempt to confront relativism: rebutting determinism and causal explanations, searching for meaningful invariants across cultures through formal investigations in the field of history of ideas (*Kulturgeschichte*), and committing himself to unveiling the spiritual trademarks of western civilization have transformed Huizinga into "a painter of frescos, not an archaeologist" (Eco 2024, 4). Huizinga seized all the positivist, scientific and evolutionist features in the practice of American historiography of his time and considered them pernicious for genuine research in cultural history. Moreover, his conservative understanding of cultural history as a "matter of heritage and general interest of the cultivated public" (Huizinga 1959, 33), and the religious overtones of his contemplation about the destiny of western culture (Gombrich 1973a, 278) have also contributed to reckon Huizinga as a reputable critic of American mass culture and anti-metaphysics, respectively.

Probably more than anything else, it was Huizinga's discontent with the new trend of culture and civilization in the United States that had prompted a shift from the serene and rather private business of the cultural historian towards the abrasive and public attitude of the cultural critic. Scandalized by the modern revolt of reason against rationality (i.e., the revolt of cynical calculations of totalitarian engineering methods against "faith in absolute values, the values of Christianity and the values of rationality") (Gombrich 1973a, 285), Huizinga experienced disappointment, disabuse and alienation. A state of deep melancholia and helplessness made Huizinga to affirm that "reason, which once combated faith and seemed to have conquered it, now has to look to faith to save it from dissolution" (quoted in Gombrich 1973b, 145). It is also probably accurate to assert that Huizinga had greater expectations from the United States, in the troublesome context of radical nationalism, fascism, Nazism and socialism that had derailed from the traditional path of western civilization. This could be the reason why Huizinga was rather uncompromising in his diagnosis of America: because he felt that America was the only hope for salvation and the New World betrayed his expectations, harsh reactions imbued with conservative overtones had predominated in his intransigent criticism during the 1920s and beyond. His correspondence with outstanding European intellectuals in the 1930s – such as Julien Benda or Aldous Huxley – remains illustrative for his melancholic resoluteness of denouncing the cultural dementia, the maniacal outbursts, derationalization and superstition, debasement of moral norms, entertainment and consumerism, technology and efficiency – all these mirroring his narrative stances of his work *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* (Gosselink 2022, 57). Ideologically, the transition from liberal and cosmopolitan views of the cultural historian

towards the conservative and nihilistic scoldings of the cultural critic is explanatory for both his despair and resignation.

Neither conservatism, nor liberalism seemed to characterize the American civilizational development, but what Huizinga called national puerilism (Huizinga 1936, 172-173). Fueled by a kind of “spiritual elan” consistent with passionate idealism, the American society was, in the eyes of Huizinga, a perpetually transitive civilization suffocated by superficiality, materialism and vulgarity, utterly an extroverted culture lacking transcendental rationality and moralism (Huizinga 1972, 242-247, 252-253, 314-315). In its unrestrained and progressive rush to transform the world and the human life conditions through comprehensive reforms in social engineering, the American mindset would radically detach from the old spirituality and cultural values of Europe. The conservative stance of Huizinga’s criticism goes unsympathetic towards democracy and mass culture in the United States. Essentially mediocre, anti-historical and future-oriented, the democratization of cultural values in the United States was responsible for generating uniformity and conformity, primitivism and irrationalism. Like the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, Huizinga was highly suspicious of the masses and the massification trend in Europe and the United States alike, blaming the “primitives within the gates of western civilization... [who] think with the blood not the mind” (Huizinga quoted in Gombrich 1973b, 144-145). Even if Huizinga did not make an explicit comparison between American democracy and the European revolutionary (socialist) and nationalistic (fascist and Nazi) ‘democracies’ in Europe, he had remained utterly scornful towards the tyranny of the masses and the anti-aristocratic and anti-elitist cultural trends. The following section purports to explain how the cultural critique of democratization processes intermingles with the rejection of the American patterns of instrumentalization, standardization, mechanization, technicism and efficiency, understood by Huizinga as symptomatic of western civilization’s decline.

Bursting the Bubble: Huizinga’s View on America as Symptomatic of Cultural Decline

Both the disqualification of the United States as a meaningful ingredient of the master narrative within the morphological outlook of Huizinga’s cultural history (see *infra*, section 2) and the unpromising state of affairs within the United States’ culture and society unveiled through Huizinga’s cultural criticism (see *infra*, section 3) had prompted the Dutch scholar’s fierce attacks and gloomy considerations towards the New World. Less interested about following the mainstream historical accounts of the United States in terms of political and economic interpretations, Huizinga launched a set of allegations rather considering both the premises and consequences of what Huizinga mainly labelled as national puerilism, gratuitous enthusiasm and naïve idealism regarding American culture and society. The holistic assessment of the United States through the lenses of an outsider – Huizinga’s 1926 two months journey to the United States had not changed his general perspective – mostly include pessimistic overtones and harsh considerations about the American cultural decline, grounded on certain conceptual and thematic pillars. The present section recapitulates Huizinga’s interpretation of these trademarks of cultural decline: mechanization and technology, social engineering and economic corporatism, progress and education, and *culture de loisir*, respectively. Huizinga’s intractable verdict about America had led him to a deep state and pessimism about the future of western culture and civilization and unconsolable nostalgia about its irreversible past.

Out of all counter-cultural trends in the United States, Huizinga pinpointed mechanization and technology as its sweeping characteristics. Apparently absorbing both the political and economy in America, mechanization and technology generate opposite effects, leading to economic progress concomitantly with having the political effect of uniformization and massification: “the machinery of democracy has absorbed democracy itself” (Huizinga 1972, 109; Huizinga 1926). Culturally, mechanization and technology are conducive to human anxiety and estrangement; technical innovations had not only changed human lives but also penetrated the realm of culture, as in the case of media control by advertisement, commodification of art

and the emergence of atonal music (Huizinga 1972, 113, 121). However, Huizinga's obsession with the predatory role of technology and mechanization prevailed in his first book *Men and the Masses in America* (1918), while the second, *America: A Dutch Historian's Vision, from Afar and Near* (1927), "was less technical in tone" (Rydin 2022, 153). The overwhelming pessimistic and nihilistic stance of Huizinga during and after his American journey had generated an intellectual predisposition towards cultural humanism against the technological style of civilization understood as materialism, industrialism and accelerated urbanization. A dominantly passeist and bucolic predisposition in the 1920s impelled Huizinga to focus on a cultural interpretation of life conditions in the United States against the Tocquevillian appraisal of equalitarianism and the toxic debasement of the elitist and 'highbrow' European traditions of the past. Consonantly to Herbert Marcuse's suspicion towards the 'unidimensional man' and George Bataille's discontent with technical utility, Huizinga had constantly deplored the conspicuous confiscation of human life by mechanization and technology, efficiency and pragmatism, conformity and standardization (Huizinga 1972, 94-96, 139-143). Ultimately, mechanization and technology stand for the imposition of rationalization upon rationality in the United States, through movies (Huizinga 1972, 113), media and the radio (Huizinga 1972, 235), rules and sport competitions (Huizinga 1972, 116), social eugenics (Huizinga 1972, 117). The loss of individualism to corporatism and social engineering had firmly established the cults of the masses, machines and managerialism.

Additionally, Huizinga reads all political, social and cultural transformations in the United States as subsumed to the craziness of the business spirit. For instance, the cardinal moments of the American political development are properly understood by instrumentalizing economism and business interests. To start with the age of the American revolution, the founding fathers tailored the federal government according to the principle of pragmatic efficiency and safeguarded the institution of slavery for the sake of economic profitability. However, Huizinga rather underestimated abolitionism and exaggerated the impact of tariff protectionism as the true ferment of the Civil War (Huizinga 1972, 9-11), which further fomented the historical development of the United States in line with the interests and greediness of the economic elites. According to Huizinga's interpretation, savage capitalism, corporatism and the exclusivist profit rule reiterated the bad European practices of oppressive feudalism with no rules of loyalty or ethical conduct (Huizinga 1972, 88-89; Torpey 2015, 293-301). By and large, the economic mantra in the United States maximized the exchange value of everything and revamped "political passions... [into] economic questions" (Huizinga quoted in Kammen 1982, 207).

Another target of Huizinga's criticism towards the United States is progress. In fact, Huizinga feared that mechanization, technology and economism were inauspicious instruments in the service of speedy progress, and, more importantly, that such an ethos would inevitably lead to superficiality, uniformity and sterility of education processes and goals in the United States. During the interwar period, the Dutch historian of culture – who was never seduced by the American civilizational model – still might have hoped that the United States was the saviour against the interwar frailties of "pessimism, revolutionarism, romanticism, amoralism or mysticism" (Bellow 1981, 209) and had grown more and more disillusioned with the true American realities. On the one hand, the American progressive and New Deal notions of progress had generated cultural dependency and uniformity (i.e., the lack of individual spiritual autonomy); on the other, internally, culture in the United States cut out the historical and the metaphysical, so that the "theodicee of progress" (Kroes 1998, 10) annihilated tradition, spirituality, mystery and imagination on the altars of technical organization, massification, commodification and future oriented enthusiasm. Acknowledging progress as scientific innovation and spiritual emptiness (Huizinga 1972, 231-234), the Dutch cultural historian entered the distinguished gallery of interwar cultural (conservative) critics of progress, alongside the Irish William Butler Yeats, the British Arnold Joseph Toynbee, the Spaniard Ortega y Gasset, the Russian Pitirim Sorokin, and the American Thomas Stearns Eliot (Gosselink 2022,

54). The modern western criticism of the American concept of progress opposed spiritual cultural history (Huizinga 1959, 57) to the American sociological concept of behaviour, to the naturalist, evolutionary and determinist views of positive sciences, and to the overall assimilation of culture in the United States to the visual and the image versus imagination and reading. The oversimplification of cultural contents was fundamentally anti-elitist and mass-oriented, stereotypical and trivial (Kroes 1998, 11). The American responses to such a depreciative characterization of the American (cultural) progress pointed to the feebleness and the general nihilistic tones of exhausted Europeans: American sociologists and psychologists in the United States associated the European cultural pessimistic criticism to speculative and abstract fabrication of historical facts, to a lifeless form of escapism and detachment, and to a rigid incapacity to be on track with the newly creative American energies. The sweeping optimism and positivism of social sciences in the United States mirrored the democratic ethos and educational expectations in America, enhancing the pragmatic and the practical to the detriment of lofty theories and abstract rationality. The French *culture de loisir* substantially epitomizes the debasement of old cultural patterns of the very possibility of spiritual regeneration; in the United States, leisure had become the phenomenal manifestation of the materialistic understanding of culture. When the last major work of Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, was firstly published in 1938, the Dutch cultural historian criticized American sport as the all-encompassing spirit of cultural puerilism, passionate competitiveness and spiritually sterile form of leisure (Huizinga 1949, 198). Moreover, soaring emotionalism and naïve excitement of Americans towards sports had moved beyond the benign cultural commodification to embrace the political in three ways. Firstly, the competitive spirit fostered by media and advertisement transformed the cultural meaning of sport as ‘playing with’ into the mercurial politics of ‘playing against’ (Hanssen 2024, 4). Secondly, the US practice of ‘electioneering’ had turned into a kind of giddy national sport (Huizinga 1949, 207-208) and, thirdly, the most alarmingly, the interwar outburst of totalitarianisms in Europe had brought about political leadership and agency in the spirit of gambling, irreverent to rules of ethical conduct and honour. Even if the politics of irresponsible gambling, generative of “indeterminacy, uncontrollability and uncertainty” (Rooden 2023, 5), was not characteristic to the United States, Huizinga deplored the collapse of world order and the fatal loss of civilization worldwide because of the cultural failure to confront machines, managerialism and the masses (Rydin 2022, 122).

Endnote on Huizinga’s Pessimism

Huizinga’s world of calm historical contemplation vanished once the first world war started in 1914; since that time, the rather abstract and austere cultural interpretations of western historical ages had firmly made room for negativistic cultural criticism prompted by the ever-growing disenchantment of the Dutch with the pernicious political, economic, and social realities of the world he lived in. The intellectual and cultural modulations of the present in contrast with the illustriousness of the past took the form of detached melancholia, conservative nostalgia and a general state of pessimism and disbelief about the future. Leaving aside the rather singular episode of his public engagement as a cultural diplomat at the League of Nations in 1938, Huizinga had always experienced displacement, anxiety and distress towards his world.

The constant sentiment of alienation had prompted negativism, austerity, elitism, and a certain inclination towards perceiving the world in catastrophic terms. His cosmopolitan and universalist apperceptions did not fit narrow-minded nationalism and vernacular radicalism of his time. Huizinga’s disdain for the political in the first half of the twentieth century stemmed from its utterly anti-cultural ethos and manifestation. One of the reasons for dismissing Huizinga’s pessimistic cultural criticism points to his overall cultural isolationism and secluded perspectivism of the present (Geyl 1963a, 231-262; Geyl 1963b, 188-237). Like his contemporary fellow, Oswald Spengler, Huizinga overtly professed a kind of romantic, metaphysical and defeatist cultural pessimism according to which decay and (self)destruction is inescapable (Gosselink 2022, 57-58); this is why the western cultural tragedy in Huizinga went beyond a

more moderate and melioristic stance of cultural criticism, even if Huizinga himself would have probably dismissed the assessment of his works as the mere product of necessary declinism in line with his pessimistic and negativistic moods. It is probably more accurate to say that Huizinga's conservative, elitist and aesthetic declinism did not succumb entirely to pessimism but turned into a type of ethical inquiry about the destiny of western (cultural) history.

Consequently, Huizinga had to confront the moral challenge of not giving in to despair and to hope for potential germs of cultural regeneration. The fact that he might have envisioned the possibility of finding salvation by attempting to find correlations between the blooming American civilization and the western (i.e., European) morphological patterns of historical and cultural explanation is worthy of further research. And the fact that Huizinga did not find what he was looking for or, more precisely, because he felt disappointment with what he had found contemplating about America could be ultimately indicative about his overall portrayal of western civilization as “cultural necropolis” (Rydin 2022, 39) characterized by disease and degeneration.

Works Cited

- Bellow, Saul. 1981. “A Writer from Chicago.” *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*. Oxford: Oxford University, 177-219.
- Burke, Peter. 1986. “Huizinga, Prophet of ‘Blood and Roses’.” *History Today* 36(11): 23-28.
- Burke, Peter. 2010. *What Is Cultural History?* Second edition. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bžoch, Adam. 2021. “Johan Huizinga’s Russia.” *Slovo A Smysl* 37: 43-57.
- Eco, Umberto. 2024. “Homo Ludens Today.” *Into the Magic Circle*, 1-15.
- Geyl, Pieter. 1963a. “Huizinga as Accuser of His Age.” *History and Theory* 2(3): 231-262.
- Geyl, Pieter. 1963b. *Encounters in History*. London and Toronto: Collins.
- Gombrich, Ernst H. 1973a. “Huizinga's Homo ludens”. In *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden. Deel 88*. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 275-296.
- Gombrich, Ernst H. 1973b. “Huizinga’s Homo ludens”. In *Johan Huizinga 1872-1972: Papers Delivered to the Johan Huizinga Conference, Groningen 11-15, December 1972*. Eds. W. R. H. Koops, E. H. Kossmann and Gees van der Plaat. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 133-154.
- Gosselink, Nora. 2022. “Becoming a Cultural Pessimist: Johan Huizinga’s *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* and *The Decline of the West*.” *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* VI (2): 53-61.
- Hanssen, Leon. 2024. “Some Remarks on the Advantages and Disadvantages of Huizinga’s Concept of Play in Current Debates.” *Into the Magic Circle*, 1-6.
- Hughenoltz, F. W. N. 1973. In *Johan Huizinga 1872-1972: Papers Delivered to the Johan Huizinga Conference, Groningen 11-15, December 1972*. Eds. W. R. H. Koops, E. H. Kossmann and Gees van der Plaat. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 91-103.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1926. “The Mechanization of Life and Society.” *American Mercury*.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1936. *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1943. “History Changing Form.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4(2): 217-223.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1949. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1959. *Men and Ideas: History, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance: Essays*. Translated by James S. Holmes and Hans van Marie. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1963. “A Definition of the Concept of History”. In *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*. Eds. Raymond Klibansky and H. J. Paton. New York: Oxford University Press, 1-10.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1972. *America: A Dutch Historian’s Vision from Afar and Near*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1989. *Briefwisseling I, 1894-1924*. Eds. Leon Hanssen, W.E. Krul and Anton van der Lem. Veen: A.W. Sijthof.

- Jardine, Lisa. 2015. *Temptation in the Archives: Essays in Golden Age Dutch Culture*. London: University College London.
- Kammen, Michael. 1982. "“This, Here, and Soon”": Johan Huizinga's *Esquisse* of American Culture". In *A Bilateral Bicentennial: A History of Dutch-American Relations 1782-1982*. Eds. J. W. Schulte Nordholt and Robert P. Swierenga. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff International, 199-226.
- Kelley, Donald R. 2003. *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kossmann, E. H. 1973. "Postscript." In *Johan Huizinga 1872-1972: Papers Delivered to the Johan Huizinga Conference, Groningen 11-15, December 1972*. Eds. W. R. H. Koops, E. H. Kossmann and Gees van der Plaats. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 223-234.
- Kroes, Rob. 1998. "America and the European Sense of History." *Abteilung für Literatur. Working Paper no. 113*. Amsterdam: John F. Kennedy-Institut für Nordamerikanstudien.
- Krul, Wessel. 1997. "In the Mirror of van Eyck: Johan Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages*." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27(3): 353-384.
- McDonald, Peter. 2019. "Homo Ludens: A Renewed Reading." *American Journal of Play* 11(2): 247-267.
- Midgley, Anne. 2012. "Cultural History and the World of Johan Huizinga." *Saber and Scroll* 1(1): 109-122.
- Mul, Jos de. 2023. "Uncle Sim Wants You! Playful Warfare." *Into the Magic Circle*, 1-10.
- Quaglioni, Diego. 2019. "The Weakening of Judgement: Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) and the Crisis of the Western Legal Tradition". In *Roman Law and the Idea of Europe*. Eds. Kaius Tuori and Heta Björklund. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 181–200.
- Rooden, Aukje van. 2023. "Playing as Gambling: Blanchot's Interpretation of Huizinga's *homo ludens*." *Into the Magic Circle*, 1-7.
- Rydin, Thor. 2022. *In the Image of Loss: A New Perspective on the Works of Johan Huizinga (1872–1945)*. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Torpey, John. 2015. "Huizinga on America." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 15(3): 293-301.
- Weintraub, Karl J. 1966. *Visions of Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.