

PERCEPTIONS AND PROPHECIES IN JOHAN HUIZINGA'S AMERICA

Augustinus P. Dierick

When in 1917 the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga accepted the task of presenting a course on American history at the University of Leiden, he had not yet visited the U.S., and, as he tells us in the foreword to the published version of his lectures, he felt considerable hesitation. American history had held no attraction for him so far: "I did not expect to find in it," he says, "any of the things by which the grandeur of the European past holds us in its grasp."¹ But he changed his mind when he began to study the subject, and became interested enough to visit the U.S. itself in 1926. From this visit there resulted in fact a second book on America.

Huizinga's misgivings about writing on America are understandable enough if one considers his career up to 1917, and the course it took later. For one thing, Huizinga was not even a historian by training. Born on December 17, 1872, in Groningen, he was the son of a professor of physiology at the university there. His father was the last of a long line of Mennonite preachers in the Huizinga family: Johan chose neither theology nor science, but first studied literature, in particular old Hindu literature. However, his first teaching appointment was in history, at a secondary school in Haarlem, and when he became instructor of Hindu studies in Amsterdam in 1903 he was soon called to the chair of history in Groningen, thanks to the support of his teacher, P. J. Blok.

In 1915 Huizinga was called to Leiden and remained there until the university was closed by the Germans during the occupation, in 1940. It was during these years at Leiden that Huizinga rose to prominence through such famous books as *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1919), a biography of Erasmus (1924) and various books on the history of the Low Countries, including *Dutch Civilization in the 17th Century* (1923, German edition). He was arrested in 1941 by the Germans and sent to a concentration camp. Released because of illness, he was sent into quasi-exile in De Steeg, near Arnhem, where he died, February 1, 1945.

By background and training, Huizinga was very much a European historian, steeped in the cultural values of Europe. But though he was influenced particularly by the German school, by Jacob Burckhardt and Wilhelm Dilthey, Huizinga developed an individual style. For one thing, he rejected the methods of physical sciences, because history for him was not a matter of theories, hypotheses and proofs, but rather the discovery of the past from sources, combined with vision and insight. One could almost say that Huizinga worked intuitively, guided by his own sensibility and feelings. At the same time, however, he rejected the efforts of popularizing historians and biographers of the

twenties and thirties, such as for example Hendrik Willem van Loon. His own field was the history of culture, to which he brought a complex moral and aesthetic norm. His Mennonite background taught him a certain "modest morality,"² but he abandoned any kind of rigid, formal dogma. He claimed little knowledge of philosophy and science, and in any case abhorred systematizing and the mechanization of the spirit.

All these characteristics can be seen in Huizinga's first work on America, *Man and the Masses in America*.³ The subtitle of the work, "Four Essays in the History of Modern Civilization," not only draws our attention to the typical *form* in which Huizinga wrote the essay, but it also alerts us to the *angle* from which Huizinga approaches his subject. We are dealing with history from the point of view of civilization; and Huizinga makes the assumption that what holds for America holds (with perhaps some delay) for modern western civilization in general. This motif indeed runs through the whole work.

At the same time, America immediately confronted this typical European historian with a formidable problem. Can we apply the criteria worked out from European history to the subject of American history? That Huizinga was himself aware of this problem he showed by setting out to test two of the most important frameworks in European history: the conflict between the old and the new, and the struggle between individualism and association (or collectivism).

As is to be expected, the conflict between the old and the new did not have much significance in America. In a country where everything is new, there are no conflicts of this kind. Certainly the conflict between the progressive and conservative forces did not apply to American politics, since both Republicans and Democrats called themselves progressive. But while Huizinga concludes that the struggle between the old and the new is almost absent, that between association versus individualism is of extreme importance, though it is less of a contradiction than in Europe, where the collectivism of the Middle Ages was superseded dramatically by the individualism of the Renaissance. Individualism is one of the great threads running through American history, Huizinga claims. But it is quite different from European individualism, considered by Burckhardt to be the essence of the Renaissance. American individualism is old-fashioned because, in colonial days, it expressed itself as an intolerant spirit against interference, and this quality has persisted. "America was won and maintained by the dogged old-fashioned individualism of the small town," Huizinga writes, "we

could almost say by medieval individualism.” (17) In this sense the American Revolution itself could be considered conservative, because it was intended to preserve liberties already acquired, and to protect them from interference by the homeland.

In the drafting of the Articles of Confederation of 1776 individualism again showed its strength, because it was the particularism of the states that carried the day. Ten years later the Constitution set up a much more centralized system of government, to be sure, but this did not denote a triumph of community spirit and unity overriding individualism and particularism, but was, according to Huizinga, the result of economic interests, which required a strong federal government. In fact, the struggle between particularism and collectivism can *usually* be seen to express itself in commercial and economic terms.

Economic factors even determine the American perception of the state. Alexis de Tocqueville, the great French historian who visited the U.S. in the 1830's, thought that the central government's authority was on the decline. By Huizinga's time the opposite was of course true. Huizinga attributes this to the economic expansion after the Civil War. It was the unsatisfactory state of the economy which created the demand for a strong federal authority, though of course not primarily to *regulate* business, but to make its expansion possible. State boundaries were virtually eliminated by trade, which in turn led to their disappearance in a political sense. Later in the century, American commercial imperialism led to political imperialism, and this is still true today. Much of the aggressiveness of the U.S. in the political field has to do with the securing of energy supplies and markets for products. Many issues in American history are commercial interests, such as the establishment of a national bank, protectionism, the issue of slavery (not a moral issue for Huizinga), the conflict over ranching and the establishment of corporations and trusts.⁴

Because of the importance of economics, there is a twofold development to be observed in U.S. political history. Huizinga writes:

The economic factor in American politics means on the one hand the definition of the direction of the goals of policy by business interests, and on the other hand, the intrusion of business habits, the business spirit, and business forms into the operation of the political apparatus. (134)

Business is served by both the Republicans and the Democrats, to the detriment of democracy, according to Huizinga. “Big business has engulfed political life,” he claims. (109)

Why then did the U.S. not have recourse to socialism to prevent the overwhelming influence of big business. Why didn't socialism “take”? Huizinga gives several reasons. In America the class struggle is not linked to the ideal of democracy, as in Europe, since democracy is (supposedly) already achieved. Moreover, socialism has consistently been linked to the foreign-born, which caused hostility to it, since American politics are both capitalistic *and* patriotic.⁵ Perhaps

even more important than these considerations, however, is the fact that socialism is only one among many political organizations and did not grow organically, as a typical *American* movement, with specific lobbying goals in mind. Here Huizinga returns to the notion of collectivism in American history.

Collectivism in America, like individualism, is a primitive force. Associations come about for concrete goals, and they have strong emotional and spontaneous characteristics. Already in colonial times there was a basis for such organizations, first in Calvinism, then in the 18th century Enlightenment, with its clubs and societies. Because of the presence of such specific organizations, American politics often take on the quality of sports, complete with organized applause and cheerleaders. Whereas the typical economic organization in America completely lacks this emotional quality. Huizinga writes:

Economic and political organizations had common roots in the native feeling for association on behalf of purposes which were ethical as well as profitable. But while the political organization kept its spontaneity and emotionality, in brief its human character, economic organization, under the pressure of capital, did without such feeling from the beginning. Only in its more recent anti-capitalist form of trade unions has economic organization again shared in the emotional element of the primitive sense of association. (59)

Of course America always showed at the same time in its history various stages of individualism and collectivism, because there was always the pioneer West, outside the grasp of the increasingly collectivist East. “The pure type of pioneer,” Huizinga writes, “is the man who cannot stand any type of government authority, and flees the limitations of civilization.” (27) But does this mean then that the East, or capitalism itself, is exclusively collectivist? Again, the contrast which we can so clearly perceive in European history does not work in America, for the individual capitalist, at least in the initial stages of capitalism, is extremely important. Even here, individualism as the predominant tendency of American history is at work to counterbalance a collectivist tendency.

Already by the 1830's, however, when de Tocqueville visited America, he made predictions that individualism would lose out because of a certain force at work in the organization of America, that of “levelling, the grinding away and obliteration of all individuality by mutual equality, with economic and intellectual differences vanishing along with political differences.” (61) This problem of what Huizinga calls the “mechanization of the community life” is one of the main topics under discussion in his book on America. (If in those passages which deal with the political history of the United States Huizinga does not quite show his usual level of inspiration, this is due no doubt both to the unfamiliarity of the material *and* the fact that this is “pure” history. Here he is of course completely at home, for he is dealing with cultural history.)

In discussing the process of “levelling” Huizinga raises a very interesting question. We may

well ask not only how far this tendency had gone by Huizinga's day, but how far it has in fact gone since. De Tocqueville seems to have been quite wrong at least as far as economic equality is concerned. The danger of a money-aristocracy was already perceived by Andrew Jackson; by Lincoln's time it had become a reality. Two factors had brought about a concentration of capital: mechanization of industrial operations and corporate organizations of business. Mechanization was itself the result of many inventions, but, in Huizinga's words: "What is notable about technicological progress is that at one and the same time it provides means making possible new and tighter forms of organization, and creates objects on which this organization works as it takes shape." (70) The development of railways, for example, gave rise to trust companies, and the telephone made concentration of business possible.

But technical inventions also limit "human independence by means of the more fully mechanical and efficient social organization it makes possible." (71) Individuals and their careers become less important as the mechanical element increases. This can even be observed in the way individual capitalists have gradually become replaced by the corporation.⁶ That the individual capitalist has become less important is something which, Huizinga notes, the Americans won't admit, because they need the myth of the self-made man.

There are grave dangers associated with the process of concentration, and in discussing these dangers Huizinga clearly shows the perspective from which not only these essays, but all of his works are written. Huizinga's criticisms are those of a person rooted in European, humanistic and (broadly defined) socialistic traditions. On the one hand he is awed by technological and mechanizing forces; on the other hand he has a great fear of them. Precisely because of his critical stance, however, his comments strike us as actually very modern, and anticipating much of the criticism of such representatives of the Frankfurt School as Horkheimer, Adorno and above all Herbert Marcuse, who of course only had his heyday forty years later.

Dangers related to the mechanization of society lie not only in the threat to the individual, but to society itself: "The great combinations have become independent forces," Huizinga writes, "they make the individual man a slave, threaten the community, and strive to dominate or supplant the state." He then goes on to say: Just as in the early middle ages society ossified into the manorial and feudal system, so it threatens to do the same in the corporate organization of industrial capital." (85) Of course this entails the disappearance of old American self-help, of individualism, and the adaptation of man to the machine, in the system called Taylorism, for which Huizinga has scant praise.

Huizinga is at his most "European" (and most pessimistic) when he turns to fields other than economics. There are clear indications that the political life is also becoming mechanized, as can be seen in the organization of the parties, with the

consequent loss of idealism. "The machinery of democracy has absorbed democracy itself," Huizinga states, and political differences are eroded. In a clear anticipation of modern conditions, he quotes one American as saying: "In our country we fool people with some pretended differences between one party called the Republican and another called the Democratic." (109)

Such dubious developments can be observed even in the cultural life. Newspapers, "the intellectual food of modern times," (111) are dominated by the advertisement style, and so is cinema. "Film remains impoverished and monotonous despite all the inventiveness, imagination, and heavy expenditures invested in its production." (113) Even scholarly activity is mechanized; here Huizinga becomes quite crotchety and finds it necessary to castigate the Dewey system of classifying books.

Clearly, Huizinga finds himself on the horns of a true dilemma. As he himself says:

...without...mechanization there is no civilization...The process of improving civilization is indivisible from the process of mechanization...But each better tool and each improved organization binds [man] again to the blind force which he has invested in them at a usurious rate of interest. (117)

What disturbs him more than anything else in all this is of course the fact that America provides the model of a *world-wide* tendency of civilization, which would do away with precisely those values with which he himself has been so closely associated. There can be no doubt that his statement found in the foreword to this book, that he became gradually fascinated with American history, is related to precisely this aspect. America as a civilization-model is what attracts Huizinga, but at the same time his own cultural background, his humanism, his "conservative" socialism, inspire a fear in him which he cannot and will not hide.

Certainly one of the most important reasons against the growth of socialism in America is the prevalence of the "commercial attitude". Huizinga writes:

Society in America is too strongly, too thoroughly commercialized, too many individuals are involved in keeping the machinery of production in operation, for a revolutionary doctrine to be able to get much of a grip here. (157)

This, again, is a surprising *aperçu*, and a further anticipation of the idea of the "one-dimensional man" which Herbert Marcuse found to apply to so many of America's citizens. Only recently, Huizinga notes, can one observe a certain trend, to use the state against capital — a trend successive Democrats in the last fifteen years have continued, and which is precisely at this moment in the process of being reversed.

Does all this mean that the Jeffersonian ideals are completely dead? No, Huizinga tells us, because there remains a great deal of moral enthusiasm in politics. "There is a perpetual tension in America between a passionate idealism and an unrestrainable energy directed to material things." (166) He specifically warns Europeans not to be too hasty in their conclusions about Americans: "There is no abuse in American society which is not

attacked first and most fiercely by Americans themselves," he says (166) a statement also echoed, interestingly enough, at the time of the Watergate scandal. "Americans," Huizinga goes on, "like all great peoples, possess the idea of a mission," (167) and they draw the justification of this sense of mission from their moral enthusiasm.

To what extent can we say that *cultural* individualism is a force in America? At first glance there is little evidence of American leadership in the arts, nor of great originality. Conformity in matters of taste seems strong in the U.S. But again, Huizinga warns readers not to jump to conclusions. How individualistic is the average Dutchman in matters of culture?

If conformism seems nevertheless somewhat stronger than in other countries, there are good reasons for this. In colonial days self preservation was all, and the struggle for survival against natural forces dominated everything. Conservatism was inherent in both Calvinism and the bourgeois life style of the 17th century, and although a new type of citizen sprang up in the South, the aristocratic planter, he did not claim a specific culture and was imitative like his bourgeois counterpart in the North. The eighteenth century, with its Enlightenment principles, its faith in reason, had a strong conservatism built in, and the following century was also characterized by many conservative elements: the puritan tradition, the drive for material prosperity, the ideas of the Enlightenment, tending towards mediocrity, a small town attitude, and an imitation of higher (i.e. European) culture.

If there is nevertheless in the 19th century the beginning of a more independent and individualistic culture, this can be attributed to the necessity of maintaining a high level of energy in conquering nature. The West is in fact a source of inspiration as well as a battlefield of many "isms". There is quite a difference here with the staid and dull backwater atmosphere of 19th century Holland, epitomized for Huizinga by the writings of Nicolaas Beets.⁷ It is in the conquest of nature, and the settlement of new regions that the Americans have shown their most striking characteristics: their zest for the future, their quest for efficiency, their confidence in perfectibility. By the 19th century, in any case, Americans were already making significant contributions to culture, through such men as Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, as well as in the sophisticated work of Henry James. But for Huizinga the author who best combines and sums up the qualities that are the most specifically American, such as energy, patriotism, love of democracy and freedom, is Walt Whitman. In fact, Huizinga concludes his book on America with a song of praise for Whitman's art and ideas, a most positive note after much criticism.

Readers of Huizinga's first book on America may well have in fact alerted him to the amount of criticism it contained, because his second book, *Life and Thought in America: Stray Remarks*,⁸ begins with an apology. Huizinga explains why he was so critical. It is because he also admires America so

much. This ambivalent attitude once again comes through in the new book. It is far less serious than the first, and deals primarily with contemporary issues. It is also more personal, more revealing of his personality. Many issues of the earlier book reappear, but there are also some new ones.

1926 had been a year of unprecedented prosperity and growth for the U.S., and in an ironic contrast with our own days, it seemed that problems of energy and supply were no longer worth discussing. But Huizinga also witnessed some disturbing aspects of this prosperous society during his travels, such as the prodigious waste in food, in accommodation unused (for a Dutchman a capital crime!) and the wilful destruction of the forests for newsprint. Certainly this society did not seem very worried about the warnings sounded at that precise time in Europe, in Oswald Spengler's book *The Decline of the West*.

Two other aspects of American society Huizinga felt to be quite unacceptable: the worship of the young and the cult of personality. He can't help criticizing the "increasing laxity of relations" between young people, and the "intolerable free-and-easy ways of the children." (261) He concludes: "I would not want to bring up a daughter here." He particularly attacks the drinking and petting parties, though, as his American editor points out, "presumably his American friends failed to explain to the staid if inquisitive Dutch visitor the difference between drinking and petting."

The cult of the personality of course seems to contradict the tendency, underlined earlier by Huizinga, of the mechanization of society. He himself had written an article in the *American Mercury* of June 1926 entitled "The Mechanization of Life and Society," in which he sketched an inevitable development towards levelling of society and thought. Radio and cinema already seemed to give ample proof of this, and the American city was growing into a mechanism rather than a place to live. The process of standardization, which was in full swing when he visited the U.S. seemed to Huizinga not only inspired by industrial necessity, but appeared to express something essential about the *ideals* of American society.

Yet Huizinga also saw positive aspects of the standardization, and the democratic impulse which inspired it. He particularly praises efforts such as those by the University of North Carolina to make education public and egalitarian. Similarly, poetry and cinema can (and occasionally do) reconcile class opposites. Huizinga is less sure about American newspapers, though he counsels Europeans who scoff at them to examine some of their literary supplements. In any case, he argues, newspapers in America have a different function. They fulfill the role of creating a community spirit, a sense of spiritual unity. Journalism also functions differently. Its economy of language and its headline style stand in stark contrast to Dutch literary exuberance, but its audience is different, and it must meet the principles of economy, efficiency and simplification which all media in America demand.

Are radio, cinema and newspapers replacing literature? Huizinga does not think so; they merely address a different audience. This also explains the tremendous contrast between the general tone of American society, with its confidence and optimism, and the tone of protest or resignation found in the works of writers like Sinclair Lewis and the critic H.L. Mencken.

It is to American thought in general that Huizinga turns in the second half of this book. What strikes him about both the sciences and social sciences in America is their practical orientation. Social sciences in particular are directed towards the welfare of society. They suggest to Huizinga a necessary counterweight to the much vaunted principle of efficiency, because they make possible an attitude of sharing and communication. These latter virtues are also to be seen in American universities. The essential task of a university professor in the U.S. is to be an "educator" (the word "scholar" in fact has a negative connotation in America). This is quite different from Holland, where the university is not only a hotbed of learning, but also a training institution. The American university is an "educational institution," and its task is seen as "educating the state itself." This is not so in Holland, where the university is an island. Huizinga writes: "Public opinion [in Holland] sees the universities as dignified and pretentious bodies outside real life." In America the university is the "brain of the republic." It is fascinating to speculate on whether in the last fifty years the roles of Dutch and American universities have not been in fact reversed!

American universities reflect the society of which they form a part. No wonder then that they also reflect what Huizinga calls the New Ethics. To Europeans these New Ethics may simply appear to be superficial. But again Huizinga sounds a cautionary note. In America, superficiality may simply mean conformism. Moreover, in interpreting American civilization we must take care to realize that some of our expectations may be wrong: thus, the shift from religion to art in Europe has its correspondence in America in a shift toward the sciences.

What does become clear, however, is the fundamental anti-metaphysical attitude of American thought; a naive anti-metaphysical attitude, coupled with an anti-historical one. The American belief in progress eliminates the past; hence the triumph of anti-historical sentiment and anti-metaphysical thinking. But Huizinga warns that a new wave of fundamentalism and revivalism might well be on its way. In one of those eerie anticipations of present-day developments, he warns: "An America turning back to puritanism and revivalism is not an imaginary danger." (321)

The last remarks demonstrates one of the characteristics which shine forth through all of Huizinga's writings on America: his exceptional understanding of the American mentality — which is unusual not only because Huizinga is an outsider looking in, but also because it is a mentality so alien to his own. We can only have admiration for a man

who makes such an extreme effort to understand, even to some extent to sympathize with a civilization that worships many gods which appear to him to be mere idols.

The other characteristic which strikes us again and again in these writings is Huizinga's ability to project forward in time certain developments in American society, and to see them as inevitable, to place them, finally, within the larger context of western civilization. We see therein Huizinga's constant preoccupation with the progress of society in its most complete sense. How he interpreted this progress can be best indicated by pointing to the quotation with which he prefaced his second book: "Progress is a terrible thing." It is taken from William James.

NOTES

¹From the Preface to the First Edition (1918), quoted from the edition of Herbert H. Rowen, *Johan Huizinga, America, A Dutch Historian's Vision, From Afar and Near* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 4. All references in the text of this article are to this edition.

²Editor's introduction, p. x.

³*Mens en Menigte in Amerika* (1918).

⁴We might add, in our days, the problems of energy, conservation and pollution.

⁵The events surrounding the Iranian hostage-taking seem to bear this out amply.

⁶It is interesting to note that John Kenneth Galbraith, in *The Age of Uncertainty* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977) points out that the giant Dutch Philips factories are exceptional in still having a member of the Philips family on the board of directors. (270)

⁷The author of a collection of sketches, *Camera Obscura*, in which the impression of 19th century Holland is one of narrow-mindedness, stagnation and boredom.

⁸*Amerika levend en denkend* (1926).