

# From cultural historian to cultural critic: Johan Huizinga and the spirit of the 1930s

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The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, who lived from 1872 to 1945, is considered to be one of the greatest historians of the 20th century. His work has been translated into many languages. More than 80 years after its first appearance, his most famous book, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, is still read the world over and regularly reprinted. Huizinga is now mainly read and admired by historians, although his book, *Homo ludens*, is also appreciated by anthropologists. In the 1930s, he was even more well-known but in a different capacity: not as a cultural historian but as a cultural critic. His book, *In the Shadows of Tomorrow*, which appeared in 1935, was soon translated into eight languages. It was as influential as Ortega y Gasset's, *The Rebellion of the Masses*, and made him 'the most famous man of the Netherlands'. This paper will describe Johan Huizinga's transition from cultural historian to cultural critic and discuss how far his cultural criticism can be seen as an example of 'the spirit of the 1930's'.

The historian Johan Huizinga lived from 1872 to 1945 and, whilst he came from a line of Baptist ministers, his father, by contrast, was a Professor in the medical faculty of the University of Groningen. As Rector of the University, member of the municipal council and President-curator of the municipal 'gymnasium', Huizinga's father belonged to the local elite of Groningen, albeit not in the 'top drawer'. The style of living in the Huizinga household was sober and even slightly blinkered. Johan attended the municipal gymnasium and, after his graduation in 1891, he read Dutch at the University of Groningen. In his student days he became fascinated by art and literature, but nonetheless did not neglect his studies. He took his bachelor's exams and gained a *cum laude iudicium* in 1893, after which he

specialized in linguistics. He graduated on 5 June 1895. After a year of further study in Leipzig, he returned to Groningen and, on 28 May 1897, he obtained his doctorate with a thesis on *De Vidûshaka in het Indisch tooneel* (The 'Vidûshaka' in the Indian theatre), under the tutelage of the sanskritist J. S. Speyer. He still was a young man, and had not yet reached the age of 25.

Huizinga could thus, with some justification, be regarded as a linguist and, with some imagination, as a sanskritist, but certainly not as a historian. As for the study of history, he had limited himself to attending P. J. Blok's lectures on Dutch history in Groningen. Blok was also instrumental in Huizinga obtaining his first job in 1897, that of history teacher at a secondary school in Haarlem. His bachelor's degree in Dutch also qualified him to teach history at this level. In 1902, the young history teacher married a girl from a very distinguished family, Lady Mary Vincentia Schorer, the daughter of the Mayor of Middelburg.

Huizinga remained a secondary school teacher, although this was not completely to his liking. He wanted something to do besides teaching, and in 1903 he became an unsalaried lecturer in the History and Literature of British India at the University of Amsterdam. In 1905, at the age of 33, Huizinga was appointed Professor of General and Dutch History in Groningen. A little less than ten years after his appointment in Groningen, Huizinga was appointed Professor of General History in Leiden. This was towards the end of 1914, shortly after the death of his wife. He quickly gained renown in the academic arena. His book *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (*The Waning of the Middle Ages*) appeared in 1919. This book made his name as a historian. In 1924, the book was published in English and German, gaining him international repute. These events were quickly followed by invitations from abroad and guest lectures. Huizinga's most successful book, *In de schaduwen van morgen* (*In the Shadows of Tomorrow*), appeared in 1935. This book was translated into eight languages very soon after its publication, and was reprinted many times. From being an internationally famous cultural historian, Huizinga now became a world famous cultural critic. Huizinga's last major work, *Homo ludens*, published in 1938, provided the third element of his current reputation, that of cultural philosopher.

At first glance, the story of Huizinga's life seems to paint a picture of a predestined and effortless road to the top. And this is indeed the way the story is often told. Those who take a closer look at this life, however, will find that there was another side to it as well and that, with hindsight, Huizinga's career was not the straightforward success story it appears.

### **Huizinga's private life**

Until very recently, we knew very little about Huizinga's private life. Some paragraphs in the autobiographical essay 'Mijn weg tot de historie' (My road to

history) provide a glimpse into it.<sup>1</sup> Huizinga's *Correspondence*, published a few years ago, greatly adds to our knowledge of the subject.<sup>2</sup>

Huizinga's father was a complicated character and a tormented spirit. He had originally wanted to study theology, but gave up this idea because he lost his faith. He lived a wild life in his student days. He contracted syphilis and, at the end, needed morphine to make his suffering bearable. One of his sons, Herman, became convinced that he also suffered from syphilis and, at 17, committed suicide because of this, just a few months before the death of their father. Obviously, these events would have made a significant impression on the dreamy and sensitive boy that was Johan Huizinga.

As has been said, Huizinga's first marriage was an extremely happy one, but it lasted only 12 years. His beloved wife died, in 1914, at a very young age and left him with five young children. He remained a widower for almost a quarter of a century until 1937, when he married Auguste Schölvink, who was 37 years his junior. They had one child. In those days it was not unusual for men to become widowers at an early age, but it was rather unusual to remain one for so long, especially in a case such as Huizinga's. At the time his first wife died, his children were 11, nine, eight, six and two years old respectively. From 1914 until 1937, over 23 years, he lived alone with his growing children and the many members of domestic staff, common in his circles in those days. His grief was not limited to the death of his wife. His oldest son Dirk, who had always suffered from poor health, died at the age of 15. Huizinga's relationship with his children was rather complicated, to put it mildly. The distance at which he kept them was unusual, even for his time.

The years of his widowerhood almost completely coincided with the years of his Professorship at Leiden University and his growing international reputation. Did the tragedies of his private life influence his work and his academic productivity? Surprisingly, the answer to this question appears to be: not at all. He wrote two of his most important works in the first five years after his first wife's death, *Mensch en menigte in Amerika* (*Men and the Masses in America*) and *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, which were published in 1918 and 1919 respectively. *Erasmus* followed in 1924 and *Tien studies* (*Ten Studies*) in 1926, the second book on America and the biography of Jan Veth in 1927, and *Cultuurhistorische verkenningen* (*Cultural-historical Explorations*) in 1929. Apart from *Homo ludens*, all his major works appeared in the years between 1918 and 1930 (*In the Shadows of Tomorrow* is a different story). In that period, his children left the house one by one; his youngest child, who was two at the time his first wife died, turned 17 in 1930.

That 12-year period between 1918 and 1930 proved to be the most creative period in his life. This is also true in a purely quantitative sense, as can be seen from his *Verzamelde werken* (*Collected Works*). In total, these comprise 4296

pages and, of these, 1702 pages were written in the 12-year period mentioned above. The 12 years prior to that period, 1905–17, resulted in 871 pages, and the 12 years after, 1930–42, produced 1068 pages. One could say that Huizinga was a late starter. His first well-known book appeared when he was 46. After that, his productivity, quantitatively speaking, always remained at a high level no matter what events occurred in his life. Qualitatively speaking, the standard of his work declined somewhat, he had reached the peak of his creativity in the first ten years of his widowhood.

Whereas Huizinga's private and family life was certainly not carefree, as we have seen, his career took a smooth and successful course. However, we must also adjust our view somewhat with regard to his career. We now know Huizinga as the world-famous historian whose work is read all over the world, but this was not always the case. One of his most famous books, *Homo ludens* was translated rather long after its original publication and it became famous even later. *Erasmus*, on the other hand, was written at the request of an American publisher, and therefore first appeared in English in 1924. It was not very successful: in 1931, the publisher had over half of the 2000 copies originally printed destroyed because of a lack of interest.

More remains to be said about Huizinga's most famous work *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, which was published in Dutch in 1919. The English and German translations appeared five years later in 1924, which can be regarded as a long time for such a famous book. Much more remarkable is the fact that the French edition did not appear until 1932, and thereby hangs a tale.

### Huizinga and the French

Huizinga's friend, W. J. M. van Eysinga, Professor of International Law at Leiden University, knew the French diplomat and historian Gabriel Hanotaux from the Assembly of the League of Nations. This curious and mercurial man had become Minister for Foreign Affairs at a very early age, but as such had not been very successful and subsequently returned to his former profession, that of historian. He edited a large number of major and successful series, was a member of the Académie Française, and may therefore be regarded as an influential person. Van Eysinga tried with success to interest Hanotaux in the idea of a translation of Huizinga's work. Hanotaux subsequently approached the publisher Champion. This intervention would turn out to be the start of a long and sometimes slightly humiliating *via dolorosa* for Huizinga.

The correspondence paints a very clear picture. It shows how Hanotaux, from the very beginning, time and again, imposes increasingly peculiar requirements on his Dutch colleague. 'You have to translate it into French yourself, is his first demand. Huizinga does it. 'You have to make it 200 pages shorter', is his second.

And again Huizinga does it. Not only that, but he even writes to Hanotaux: ‘The book is no doubt the better for it’.<sup>3</sup> The book has to be shorter still, the French is not good enough, the publisher has no money and Hanotaux has no time. Finally, Champion asks Huizinga to ensure that a potential French translation will also be sold in the Netherlands. When Huizinga points out that this is impossible, Champion demands that Huizinga pay half the printing costs. This is more than Huizinga can take. ‘To buy the honour of seeing my work published in French’ is below his dignity.<sup>4</sup> The translation was never published, and in 1927, after six years of agony, Hanotaux finally returned the manuscript.

Five years later, a French edition is published after all, but in a different translation and by a different publisher. Huizinga again approached Hanotaux asking him to write a foreword to this edition. The latter complies, but writes in an accompanying note that he really had not had enough time to do it because he was due to leave for Morocco. He apologizes for it being a chaotic text and suggests that it may need to be improved when the proofs come in. Or perhaps it may not. It was left to Huizinga to decide what to do with the text. The book did indeed appear with the foreword as written by Hanotaux, a curious, rhetorical and chaotic text that can only have put off its potential readers. The book was not a success and, in 1936, the disappointed publisher Payot wrote that he had only sold 29 copies in the previous year, and therefore wants to offer the book at half price. In order to stimulate sales, he will put a paper band around the book with the text: ‘This book teaches us that in times of great trouble, we should not despair of human nature. Gabriel Hanotaux de l’Académie Française’<sup>5</sup> In this way, Huizinga — or rather his publisher — may have profited from Hanotaux’s fame and rhetoric, at least to some extent.

It is a strange history, and yet a poignant one. Just imagine Huizinga, the widower, sitting in his study and translating *The Waning of the Middle Ages* into his schoolboy French, and taking his ‘homework’ to be discussed sentence by sentence with the austere minister of the Leiden Walloon Church, Cler, who rewrites every sentence, striking out every metaphor. Then imagine that the author has to cut his work to half the size of the original, and one cannot but be surprised about the peculiar route that this work, now so famous, has had to travel.

Even after the French edition of *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, French interest in Huizinga still remained rather meagre. The strange thing about this is that the *Annales-school* arose in France in 1929, named after the journal *Annales d’Histoire Economique et Sociale*, and came to be a very influential group of historians. The founding fathers, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, preferred to work on the same periods that Huizinga was specialized in — the late Middle Ages and the early-modern period — and were also very interested in the type of history that Huizinga pioneered, the history of mental attitudes. In an article about history and psychology, Febvre praised *The Waning of the Middle Ages* and called it ‘fort

suggestif.<sup>6</sup> This article later came to be famous because, as was often the case with Febvre, it was in the nature of a scholarly programme. The article's argument ends in a series of suggestions for new historical themes, a history of love, death, piety, cruelty, joy and fear. This list is reminiscent of Huizinga's list of wishes, which includes a history of vanity, pride, the seven cardinal sins, the garden, the market, the horse, the inn, etc.<sup>7</sup>

The interests of Huizinga and of the historians of the *Annales* display remarkable similarities. However, there was hardly any contact between them, and certainly no cooperation ever developed. In the index of names in Huizinga's *Collected Works*, the names of Bloch and Febvre take a modest place. Febvre is mentioned three times in passing and his name does not appear at all in Huizinga's overview of *De geschiedschrijving in het hedendaagsche Frankrijk (Historiography in Present-day France)*, which appeared in 1931. Marc Bloch only appears as the author of reviews in the *Revue Historique*. The name of the journal *Annales* is not mentioned anywhere and the only thing Huizinga ever wrote about the work of either of the founding fathers of the *Annales* was a rather critical review of Marc Bloch's *Les Rois thaumaturges*.

Thus, Huizinga's interest in the *Annales* was limited and, by the same token, little interest was shown in his work by them. For instance, the French translation of *The Waning of the Middle Ages* has never been reviewed in the *Annales*. Marc Bloch did review the German edition of the book in the *Bulletin de la Faculté des Lettres de Strasbourg*. It appears from the *Correspondence* that Febvre asked Huizinga for an article for the *Annales* twice within a brief period at the end of 1933. Apparently the first letter received a hesitant reply from Huizinga. Febvre did not give up immediately but wrote in his next letter that the whole of *The Waning of the Middle Ages* would have been appropriate for publication in the *Annales*: 'All chapters of your *Waning of the Middle Ages* could have appeared here one after the other'. Huizinga next submitted two topics for publication, which were apparently not to Febvre's liking. Huizinga then told him he did not have anything else to submit and had in the meantime become occupied with other subjects.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing came of Huizinga's cooperation with the *Annales*, because the editors did not contact him until after *The Waning of the Middle Ages* had been published in French. By then Huizinga had largely shifted his attention from cultural history to cultural criticism. The fact that an entire group of historians had devoted themselves to an area that he once had explored all by himself seems to have escaped his attention completely. The journal *Annales* appeared for the first time in 1929, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* was published in 1919 and the French edition in 1932. One wonders how things would have turned out had Champion published the book in 1922 or 1923.

### From cultural historian to cultural critic

As has been mentioned, Huizinga's productivity abated somewhat after his 55th year, yet it still remained considerable. However, the nature of his work changed. In the 1930s, from having been a cultural historian he became mainly a cultural critic. Rather than a scholar he now was an intellectual. The extent to which that transition was either the result of a conscious choice or of circumstance is difficult to ascertain. In his major work about modern Dutch historiography, the Belgian historian Jo Tollebeek wrote that circumstances after 1933 'forced [...] Huizinga to a fundamental cultural criticism'.<sup>9</sup> That is putting it a bit strongly. It was most probably a combination of factors that brought Huizinga to undertake his activities as a cultural critic. The situation in the world was of course important, but his personal development also played a role.

It seems that by the end of the 1920s, his main creative wave had run its course and his doubts about the importance of purely scholarly work grew. He had always had these doubts. Huizinga had always been more of a generalist than a specialist. He preferred to write for a general cultural journal such as *De Gids* rather than for a specialist historical journal such as the *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*. Nevertheless, he had been extremely successful as a historian. He was undoubtedly held in high regard as a scholar in the Netherlands, as well as becoming a member and eventually the president of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. As a historian he was also known and acknowledged abroad. Would it not have been appealing to follow up these academic successes by playing a role outside of the academic and university world, and to make known to a wider public the opinions and insights in modern civilization he had developed? In other words, was not the time right to take up a more important position in the intellectual and cultural life of his times? It seems not too implausible that such ideas and emotions must have gone through his mind. Maybe his domestic circumstances also played a role. The first phase of life after his first wife's death, which had been coloured by his family and work, ended around 1930. Whatever brought Huizinga to his new activities, it is certain that he played his new role of cultural critic with great enthusiasm, and that he felt comfortable in this role. It added a new and fulfilling element to his existence. It is to this part of his work, and particularly to *In the shadows of tomorrow*, his main work in this area, that we must now turn.

In October 1933, Huizinga gave a lecture on 'The future of the European spirit' to the Committee of Arts and Literature of the League of Nations.<sup>10</sup> This presentation, which was followed by a discussion with prominent European intellectuals such as Julien Benda, Aldous Huxley, Paul Valéry and others, can be regarded as Huizinga's first step on the road of contemporary cultural criticism. In fact, the two main themes of *In the shadows of tomorrow* can already be found

in the last paragraph of this lecture. In the first sentence of this paragraph we find a warning: 'Europe today finds itself exposed to more than one force threatening to send it back to barbarism'.<sup>11</sup> And the last sentence contains a recommendation: 'It is, after all, only the moral practice of communities and individuals that can cure our poor world, so rich and yet so infirm'.<sup>12</sup> The entire work, *Shadows*, published later, is no more than an elaboration of these two themes.

In 1934, he further elaborated on this in an open letter to Julien Benda.<sup>13</sup> Nationalism, superstition in technology, the need for self-discipline, familiar themes, are all discussed here. In that same year *Nederland's geestesmerk* ('The cultural identity of Holland') appeared, which is a true ode to the Netherlands and a prayer of thanks for the divine blessing that rests on the history of his country. The book includes a paragraph on the 'Crisis of culture',<sup>14</sup> in which Huizinga announced that he would further elaborate later, in a larger work, on what he had only briefly touched upon here. Here too, we find themes such as technocracy and over-organization, heroism and 'puerilism', the weakening of the morale and the decline of morals, the 'error of universal suffrage', political irrationalism, and such like. Then he was invited to deliver a speech at a dinner at 'De Grote Club' in Amsterdam in 1934 on the topic: 'Is our civilization in danger?'<sup>15</sup> And finally on 8 February 1935, Huizinga gave a speech in Brussels about the 'Crisis of civilization'. This speech was to become the reason for him to write his most successful work: *In the Shadows of Tomorrow*.

This book is no doubt Huizinga's main cultural critical work. The title provides an indication of its content. It is about the future of culture, the prospects for which are not good. The subtitle *Een diagnose van het geestelijk lijden van onzen tijd* ('A diagnosis of the mental suffering of our time') makes this even clearer. The book is about suffering, and the author obviously sees himself as a doctor who wants to diagnose the disease.

This is the main theme of the book, which is developed in 21 brief, sometimes very brief, chapters. In each of these chapters he described one of the ailments of contemporary civilization. This is preceded by some general paragraphs in which the cultural crisis is determined, compared with the past and placed in the framework of an analysis of the cultural concept itself. Some themes are now familiar, the weakening of judgement (illustrated by cinema and advertising), the decline of the critical mind (apparent from the theories on race and Freud's ideas), the abuse of science (expressed in birth control and bacteriological warfare, a surprising combination at first glance), the betrayal of the knowledge ideal (by placing the will higher than knowledge), the cult of life (which results in an overestimation of earthly happiness and a lack of interest in the hereafter), the decline of moral standards both in the international community (as expressed in the theory of the amoral state), and in private life (impurity, glorification of vice, the romanticized view of crime), the cult of heroism (called the 'superficial vogue



of Nietzsche's philosophy')<sup>16</sup>, 'puerilism' (meaning the glorification of records, sports, games and of youth), lack of style and other wrongs in modern art.

Finally, Huizinga discusses the chances of recovery. Social, political and economic reform will not suffice. They will solve some problems but if the same spirit remains in control, civilization will not be restored: 'A new spirit is needed', 'an internal cleansing', 'the mental *habitus* of people needs to be changed'.<sup>17</sup> This is the way he puts it in the final chapter, entitled 'Catharsis'. To achieve that catharsis, a new ascesis is needed, a 'surrender [...] to what may be considered the highest', not to the state or people or class or individual happiness, but to 'He who said: "I am the way, the truth and the life."' <sup>18</sup>

This is the way it should be, but will it really turn out this way? Huizinga does not express his opinion on this. After all, the book was only presented as a 'diagnosis', and one should not look for a prognosis or a therapy. Nevertheless, there is something of a prognosis to be found in the text (the patient is sick, but not yet doomed) together with a remedy (ascesis and reconsideration are prescribed).

The main idea of *Shadows*, then, is that civilization is in decline and that this can be reversed only by a spiritual, internal regeneration through the recovery of an absolute moral embedded in metaphysics. This idea can also be found in many other writings, both long and short, such as 'Humanisme ou humanités?', 'Geistige Zusammenarbeit der Völker', 'Conditions for a recovery of civilization', which Huizinga published in the years that followed.<sup>19</sup> They also constitute the core of his second large work about the cultural crisis of his time, *Geschonden wereld* (*Damaged World*), which was written under difficult circumstances during the war, and which was published in 1945, shortly after that war and also shortly after the end of his own life.<sup>20</sup>

I can be brief about this last work, not because it is without significance but, insofar as it adds new elements to Huizinga's earlier work, particularly in the shape of fairly extensive semantic and historical views of the concepts of civilization and culture, it is of little relevance with regard to our topic. Insofar as it does relate to our topic, the book offers the same diagnosis (the crisis is a cultural crisis), the same prognosis (the future is uncertain, but we have to keep hoping) and the same therapy (remedy has to come from an ethical reconsideration and individual catharsis) as *Shadows*.

In *Shadows*, Huizinga also paid attention to international political morals. This topic was very important to him and was also to take up a considerable place in his *Damaged World*. Huizinga resisted the view of the amoral state, as did Hugo Grotius and his friend and colleague from Leiden, the lawyer Cornelis van Vollenhoven before him, and made a plea for an international moral standard. He opposed especially the philosophy of the German lawyer Carl Schmitt, who had argued that the issue between states was not about right or wrong, but about friend

or foe. With this he touched on one of the most important German historical traditions, that of the 'Primat der Aussenpolitik'. His remarks in this context about the work of Gerhard Ritter led to a correspondence with 'this exceptional and calmly thinking historian' which somewhat tempered the debate.<sup>21</sup> The German government was less composed in its reaction as becomes clear from the fact that, after *Shadows*, Huizinga's name started to appear on the official German *Listen des schädlichen und unerwünschten Schrifttums* (Lists of damaging and undesirable books).<sup>22</sup>

*In the Shadows of Tomorrow* was a successful book, and it made Huizinga world-famous. A great deal has been written about it, then and later, and many have studied the source and meaning of the views voiced in it. Were they merely an expression of the emotions of an old and downcast man, or was there more to it? Dutch critics such as the essayist Jacques de Kadt, the historian Jan Romein, a former student of Huizinga, and others regarded it as a cry for help coming from a member of the bourgeoisie and emphasized the class-relatedness of his ideas. Others still, the German National-Socialists for instance, regarded his ideas as typically Dutch. This is all true, but first and foremost it is a book that is characteristic of the period in which it originated. Therefore, we should not only focus our attention on the spirit of Huizinga himself, but also on that of his time, the 1930s.

### Huizinga and the spirit of the 1930s

Huizinga's book about the mental suffering of his time was one of many. There was a great deal of true suffering in the 1930s, particularly in the forms of poverty and unemployment. But it also was a period of general angst. The fact that so many books about crisis and decline appeared in that particular period was not surprising. The First World War had ended a period of optimism and long-term international stability. The Russian Revolution of 1917 had resulted in the first modern dictatorship. Mussolini had established the first fascist dictatorship in the 1920s, followed in the 1930s by the economic crisis and the rise of Hitler. It would have been astonishing had historians and intellectuals refrained from studying these phenomena and had priests and ministers refrained from asking people to pray and keep hope.

A large number of important works on this theme of crisis appeared, with the best known being Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*<sup>23</sup> and Ortega y Gasset's *Rebellion de las Masas*. Albert Schweitzer published the first part of his *Kulturphilosophie* in 1923, which started with the simple yet catching observation: 'We live under the sign of the decline of civilization'.<sup>24</sup> As early as 1919, Paul Valéry published his *La Crise de l'esprit* in which he wrote: 'Nous autres, civilisations, nous savons maintenant que nous sommes mortelles' ('We,

civilizations, now know that we are mortal’).<sup>25</sup> In his book about the ‘new Middle Ages’, the Russian emigrant Berdjajev gave his view on the difference between Western elements of European culture, i.e. focused on the earthly and finite, and Eastern elements focused on the revelation and the infinite. He felt the future lay in the Eastern element, because it held the remedy against the mechanistic and atheistic spirit of the West.<sup>26</sup> The German count and philosopher Keyserling published *Das Spektrum Europas* in 1928. In it he stressed the diversity within the European cultural spectrum as well as the unity of Europe. That unity was to be found in the European spirit. The task of Europe was to preserve ‘the holy fire of the spirit’.<sup>27</sup> Keyserling founded his ‘Schule der Weisheit’ (School of Wisdom) in Darmstadt for this very purpose.

The 1930s showed a true explosion of crisis studies. Arnold Toynbee published the first three parts of his major Spenglerian *Study of history* in 1934.<sup>28</sup> The American sociologist of Russian descent, Pitirim Sorokin, concluded in the third volume of his *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, on the basis of what he called ‘a vast body of evidence’, that ‘every important aspect [...] of Western society’ was in an extraordinary crisis.<sup>29</sup> Toynbee and Sorokin, however, were not to become famous until after the Second World War.

The authors in the area of cultural criticism, who did become known in the 1930s were others, the most famous probably being Spengler, Ortega y Gasset and Julien Benda, but there were more. Ernst Jünger gave his view on modern man in *Der Arbeiter*, published in 1932.<sup>30</sup> In the same year, Henri Bergson published *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* and Jacques Maritain published *Humanisme intégral* in 1936.<sup>31</sup> Henri Massis, a right-wing ideologist, wrote his *Defense de l’Occident*,<sup>32</sup> in which he compared the West with the East and defended the West.

Poets and novelists such as Yeats and Eliot also expressed complaints about the decline of civilization and views on what caused it, as well as about the opportunities for restoration by way of introducing authoritarian and/or aristocratic systems. The 1930s can rightly be called the golden age of intellectual commitment. Some of these authors committed themselves to the Communist ideology and the Soviet Union, others to Fascism or National Socialism. However, there were others still who could not find satisfaction in these movements and who sought new solutions. That is why a restless search for new ways and methods became apparent in these years, this having been characterized by the phrase ‘L’esprit des années trente’ (‘The spirit of the nineteen thirties’).<sup>33</sup>

For some, the crisis of the 1930s was primarily a socio-economic crisis, a crisis of capitalism. They looked for new forms of socio-economic structuring and organization. Others felt it constituted a crisis of democracy. They looked for new forms of leadership and political organization. Still others, with one view not excluding another of course, focused mainly on the international crisis, the crisis

of the European system of states, which was a result of nationalism gone haywire. They looked for new forms of international organization, such as the League of Nations and the Pan-Europe movement.

However, there was also a group of people who regarded the crisis as, in essence, a cultural crisis. Huizinga belonged to this group. He had little interest in socio-economic aspects. Politics was another area in which he was not particularly interested, although he did have ideas about it. He felt democracy was only acceptable with 'the addition of an element of aristocracy',<sup>34</sup> and regarded the Dutch system of proportional representation in parliament 'the silliest mistake [...] a doctrinal theory of state has ever made'.<sup>35</sup> He paid a great deal of attention to the dangers of nationalism and international rivalry. He deemed an international moral and supra-state organization necessary. All these themes are dealt with in his work, yet to him the main issue was the crisis of culture.

Huizinga's cultural criticism belongs to the aristocratic school. With it, and in the nature of his analyses, his views sometimes came close to those of some Fascist and reactionary cultural critics. His witticisms about the irrational character of the democracy, his concern about 'the extinction of the supply of indigenous people' in Western Europe<sup>36</sup>, his complaint about 'the depraved half-civilized' human being who does not know the wholesome restrictions of respect for tradition<sup>37</sup>, his aversion to modern art and compulsory education, his concerns about mechanization, urbanization, the decay of the landscape, the ugliness of the suburbs, and so many other things, remind us of reactionary authors such as Yeats, Eliot, Bernanos, Massis and others. It would not be difficult to compile an anthology of statements and judgements expressed by Huizinga that can also be found in the writings of the many reactionary and Fascist authors who were active during the period between the two wars. On the other hand, it would also not be difficult to compile a similar anthology of statements made by Huizinga in which the social and political opinions of these authors are contested. The latter is less surprising than the former, but it is more important because, given the influence of the spirit of their time on all these authors, their mutual differences are the issue here. There are a number of differences, and they are significant.

In the first place, Huizinga often implicitly compares the present with a past, idealized or not, and this has to be so because otherwise one would not be able to discern either changes or decline. However, he does not want to return to that past, at least he realizes that this is impossible and he is too much of a historian to believe in such a return. Civilization has developed, and will develop further. We should not go back, he argues, but must move forward. We have to get through this crisis, even if we do not know where this will lead us. We have to keep creating culture, he says. This shows that Huizinga was not a reactionary. The second difference, with at least some of the reactionary thinkers of that time, stems from Huizinga's faith. He shows his Christianity in his work and he places his faith in

the restoration of Christian values. The third difference is that Huizinga has never wanted to commit himself, politically or in any other way. In this respect he resembles Julien Benda, who pointed out in his *La Trahison des clercs* that commitment was the main sin of the modern intellectual.<sup>38</sup> He also kept a certain distance with regard to the Dutch ‘Committee of Vigilance of Anti-national-socialist Intellectuals’, even though he certainly sympathized with their ideas.

The fourth and final difference stems from the true sobriety and bourgeois mentality that marked his character and his world. There was a clear aristocratic element in his aversion to modern culture. In his concern about the phenomena of his time and the rise of the half-civilized human being, Huizinga was no doubt honest. However, he had too much common sense to believe in ‘the new man’ of the Fascists and the Communists, and he was too much of an Erasmian not to detest fanaticism and radicalism, too much of a historian not to be convinced of the relativity of things, and too much of a Christian not to be aware of the limited capacity of man to take control of his own fate. After all, he was a very down-to-earth type of man. One should not expect too much zeal for the creation of the new man from someone who used to call it a day at ten o’clock every night, saying to his family: ‘I don’t know about you, but I am going to bed’.<sup>39</sup>

### Conclusions

We live in a world that is radically different from that of Huizinga, and we know it. The period between 1914 and 1945 was indeed, as was experienced and described by many, a time of crisis or at least transition. The position of Europe in the world, which in the previous century had been so dominant that it sometimes seemed as if the rest of the world did not matter, was changing. The colonial era drew to an end. America informally took over leadership of the world after 1914–18, and did so formally after 1940–45. Correspondingly, there was a change in culture and society that is often called the ‘Americanization’ of Europe.

The crisis caused by these social and global changes is now over and done with. The masses have not adjusted to fit the elite, but rather the elite have adopted the taste of the masses. That is why a typical 1930s theme, such as that of elite-versus-masses is no longer topical, the distinction no longer exists. It has often been said in reaction to the success of books such as Huizinga’s *Shadows* and Ortega’s *Rebellion of the Masses* that penitential sermons always have been popular. But that too is no longer the case. The prevailing mood is no longer one of pessimism, but one of optimism.

The remarkable thing is that already, immediately after 1945, this development was clearly to be seen. One would expect that the Second World War, the holocaust, the atom bomb and the Cold War would only have reinforced the mood of crisis. But they did not, at least not with regard to the future of European

civilization. In the second half of the 1940s quite a number of books appeared on 'the-crisis-of-Europe-and-its-civilization', but in them, besides the many concerns expressed, a certain optimism could be detected. Democracy had won, western civilization had proved it was alive, and once again our culture had a future. And in later years these feelings became even stronger. Today, we are satisfied with our wealth, generally speaking, with our society and even with our culture. As in the years before 1900, we have recently experienced a *fin de siècle*, but this time without many feelings of crisis. We know, either from what we read or, more likely, from what we see of other continents on television, that things can be different, and we are not envious, either of the disciplined way of life in wealthy Japan or of the poverty of Africa or equally of the veiled and alcohol-free life under the Ayatollah regime. We may also be living in a world that is 'possessed', to quote the famous opening words of *In the Shadows of Tomorrow*, but we are not anymore worried by this.

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