

# A “mighty stream” of anti-intellectualism: Johan Huizinga, his age, and ours

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Johan Huizinga’s foray into cultural criticism, *In the shadow of tomorrow* (1935/1936), has enjoyed a rather one-sided reception. It has largely been interpreted as a series of conservative complaints about modern technology and over-organization, the deterioration of moral standards and the decay of style and good taste, and the increasing engulfment of civil life by the demands of mass politics. Critics have also been underwhelmed by Huizinga’s call for spiritual catharsis and asceticism as the proposed remedy for this purported crisis of western civilization. While all these elements are indeed present in Huizinga’s account, they do not touch the core of his diagnosis of the cultural crisis. He himself designated the “disavowal of the intellectual principle” as the focal point of his diagnosis. It was not just that some schools of thought had repudiated their adherence to reason, but that many divergent tendencies had merged into a “mighty stream” of anti-intellectualism. This was, in Huizinga’s view, the defining characteristic of the age and lay at the root of the cultural crisis. It offers interesting parallels and contrasts with our own so-called post-truth era of disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories. This article aims at a detailed reconstruction and contextualization of the core of Huizinga’s diagnosis of the crisis of western civilization and draws some tentative parallels with the present era.

Keywords: Cultural criticism; cultural crisis; philosophy of life; existential philosophy; sociology of knowledge; Huizinga.

## **The surprising relevance of Huizinga’s cultural criticism for today**

At one time, Johan Huizinga’s *In de schaduwen van morgen* (translated by his son Jacob Herman as *In the shadow of tomorrow*) (1935/1936) was more popular than his world-famous historical monograph *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (‘The waning of the Middle Ages’) (1919). It belongs to a genre of cultural criticism that also

includes José Ortega y Gasset’s *Revolt of the masses* (1930) and several other specimens from the interwar period, all of which expressed deep concerns about the prospects of the humanistic ideals held by a cultural elite to which their authors themselves invariably belonged. They saw western culture threatened by an increasing *massification* and *levelling* in the wake of technological change, economic rationalization, and the growing influence of the lower classes in social and political life. In the 1960s this genre of cultural criticism largely became obsolete as the fears it expressed turned true. As the Dutch historian Remieg Aerts observes,

Democratization has pushed the humanistic and holistic concept of civilisation, moralism, and elitism aside as “antiques and curiosities”. Culture is in everybody’s possession: the high good has been converted into pennies. Therewith the old kind of cultural criticism also disappears, but its pessimism is confirmed. (Aerts 1996, 58)

In this article I want to argue nonetheless that Huizinga’s cultural criticism from the 1930s has still a surprising relevance for us today. But let me first note that Aerts’ negative judgment about this genre and Huizinga’s special version of it is by no means unique but reflects a widely held view among Huizinga’s younger historical colleagues. While *In de schaduw van morgen* (henceforth to be referred to as *Shadow*) received widespread approval from the pre-war lay public (Du Pree 2016), many professional historians (for example, Romein 1950; Geyl 1963; Wesseling 2015) were later on highly critical of his venture into cultural criticism. They found fault with the way he treated the crisis of the 1930s: not primarily as an economic and political crisis but rather as a manifestation of a deeper cultural crisis, for which a spiritual catharsis and a new asceticism were seen as the ultimate remedies. Huizinga’s complaints about the deterioration of moral standards, the decay of style and decorum, the growing apostasy from Christianity, and his concerns about the increasingly dominant role of the masses in politics, sports, and cultural life stamped him in their eyes as a stubborn conservative, unable and unwilling to accept the hard realities of modern technology and organization, economics, and politics and longing back to the good old days when a select intellectual aristocracy set the cultural tone. Carla du Pree summarized the *communis opinio* among later historians thus: “Huizinga was henceforth mainly seen as a talented historian, who however would have done better not to occupy himself with cultural criticism” (Du Pree 2016, 253).

Jan Romein even went so far as to argue that Huizinga was unable to understand his age precisely because he did not *want* to understand it (Romein 1950, 219). He recalled that Huizinga always proudly told his students that he had never seen a cinema from the inside. This piece of anecdotal evidence is in line

with what Huizinga’s son Leonhard later reported in his memories about his father:

According to him we were just wasting our time when we went to the cinema. He had a deep contempt for this institute, which appeared to him as an expression of utter vulgarity. So much had he indoctrinated us – or at least me – with this view, that even as a 17-year-old boy I still always looked around furtively to ascertain that nobody saw me entering a cinema. (L. Huizinga 1963, 120)

In *Shadow*, Huizinga had this to say about cinematic art:

Dramatic action itself is practically entirely expressed in the outwardly visible while the spoken word is relegated to a place of only secondary importance. The art of watching has become mere skill at rapid apperception and understanding of continuously changing visual images. The younger generation has acquired this cinematic perception to an amazing degree. This novel bent of mind, however, means the atrophy of a whole series of intellectual functions. To realize this one need only consider the difference between following a comedy of Molière and a film. Without claiming superiority of intellectual over visual understanding, one is nonetheless bound to admit that the cinema allows a number of aesthetic-intellectual means of perception to remain unexercised which cannot but lead to a weakening of judgment. (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 45-46)

When reading such passages, we can hardly suppress a smile as we are struck by the elitist disdain about going to the movies instead of attending a classic comedy. Pieter Geyl’s characterization of Huizinga as “accuser of his age” seems apposite (Geyl 1963), as does the apt title Jacques de Kadt chose for his review *De deftigheid in het gedrang* (‘Dignity driven into a corner’) (De Kadt 1991 [1936]).

Before we dismiss Huizinga’s diagnosis of the crisis of western civilization as hopelessly out of date, however, we should consider that the fact that he felt ill at ease with his own age by no means implies, as Romein too easily suggested, that he did not *understand* his age. If anything, it would have made him more sharply aware of many of its shortcomings. As Ernst Gombrich wrote in Huizinga’s defense, “it is from those who react to the problems of their time in an intensely personal way that we can generally learn much more than we do from the well-adjusted” (Gombrich 1973, 285). Huizinga’s account includes numerous perceptive observations on the weakening of judgment, the decline of the critical faculty, the increasing disregard for truth and the strong influence of various anti-intellectualist doctrines, all of which appears highly relevant in our own post-truth age of fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. The danger of the

tendencies Huizinga discerned was that they reinforced political polarization and could pave the way for the rise of dictatorships. He gave the following description of the general state of mind of his time, which with some modifications could be extrapolated to our own post-truth era:

Delusion and misconception flourish everywhere. More than ever men seem to be slaves to a word, a motto, to kill one another with, to silence one another in the most literal sense. The world is filled with hate and misunderstanding. There is no way of measuring how great the percentage of the deluded is and whether it is greater than formerly, but delusion and folly have more power to harm and speak with greater authority. For the shallow, semi-educated person the beneficial restraints of respect for tradition, form and cult are gradually falling away. Worst of all is that widely prevalent indifference to truth which reaches its peak in the open advocacy of the political lie. (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 150-151)

Although we might have reservations about the typically conservative appeal to the beneficial effects of respect for tradition, we can hardly disagree with Huizinga’s view that universal education in itself is not a sufficient antidote to the rule of delusion and mendacity.

In an essay published in *Fortnightly* in 1940, Huizinga noted the imperviousness of modern man to reason and argument despite the legacy of universal education:

Man [sic] is supposed to be a reasonable being. If he really were, his mind when holding some opinion should yield to such arguments as proved its untenableness. But in actual fact it seldom shows itself willing or capable to do so, even on scientific matters, not to speak of political or confessional opinions. [...] Has there ever been a Fascist or a Communist who allowed himself to be cured by having it expounded to him that his premises were wrong? (Huizinga 1950 [1940], 470)

In our own so-called post-truth times we have also found out to our dismay that scientific enlightenment and fact checks are not always effective and can even be counterproductive in halting the spread of fake news and disinformation. The reason is, as psychologists have pointed out, that the human mind does not actually work as it was supposed to work according to the western liberal tradition, which assumes that “if we ‘educate’, ‘inform’ and ‘reason with’ people then they will reach a logical conclusion from the presented evidence” (Coper 2022, 213). Instead, human beings have a “strong desire to conform to each other and [their] pre-existing worldviews” (213).

### The subjugation of the will to knowledge to the vital impulse

Almost all of Huizinga’s critics have largely ignored what he himself described as the “focal point” of his diagnosis (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 110), or “the most fundamental element of the cultural crisis as a whole” (64-65), namely what he alternatively called “the disavowal of the intellectual principle” (63), or the “subjugation of the will to knowledge to the vital impulse” (64). Why the critics failed to engage with the central core of Huizinga’s cultural criticism is hard to say; perhaps they were too obsessed with denouncing him as an old-fashioned conservative. It is however precisely this core of his diagnosis which assumes a new relevance in light of our post-truth era.

Huizinga defended the claims of science and reason against various anti-intellectualist deemed schools of thought current in his age that tended to deprecate their achievements and bemoan the consequences for human life. Prominent among these schools was the so-called philosophy of life or *Lebensphilosophie*, which traced its origins back to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson. This current of thought was very influential in the 1920s and 1930s, also outside academia. It held that intuition and feeling, rather than reason and intellect, would enable people to directly access and experience the reality of life and reconnect to the meaningful cosmic totality of *All-Life* (Sassen 1938; Skidelsky 2008). In fact, the philosophy of life amounted to a type of cultural criticism in its own right. It articulated a deeply felt dissatisfaction with a mechanized and overly rationalist civilization, which allegedly had alienated people from the sources of life, from their fellow human beings, and from the rest of nature. The most extreme form of this type of cultural criticism can be found in the work of two German *life-philosophers*, the left-leaning Theodor Lessing and the right-leaning (and antisemitic) Ludwig Klages. The titles of some of their major works reveal the message: Lessing’s *Die verfluchte Kultur* (‘The cursed civilisation’) (1921) and Klages’ *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (‘The spirit as adversary of the soul’) (1929-1932). They went further than other philosophers of life insofar as their criticism amounted to an unconditional condemnation of culture and the schematizing spirit as inherently hostile to life (Aerts 1996, 41).

The philosophy of life was popularly expressed by the Dutch vitalist poet Hendrik Marsman in his famous poetic line “*Groots en meeslepend wil ik leven!*” (‘I want a life, grand and compelling’) (Marsman 1941, 75) and in his adage that “a strong life justifies itself” (Marsman 1979 [1926], 595). Huizinga disagreed with this view. He raised the question of what could guide the will if it scorns all guidance from the intellect (or from the Christian moral law), answering ominously: “Only life itself, blind and inscrutable life” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 92).

Although there is some common ground between the cultural criticism inspired by the philosophy of life and Huizinga’s criticism of western civilization (both took issue with modern technology, mechanization, and economic rationalization, for example), there are also major differences. In fact, Huizinga’s cultural criticism was in many respects a mirror image of the earlier cultural protest concerning the dominance of reason and the schematizing intellect in the name of life, feeling, and intuition. Indeed, the very phrase Huizinga used to diagnose the central affliction of modern culture, the “subjugation of the will to knowledge to the vital impulse” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 64), could have been the rallying cry for the various forms of the philosophy of life. While the latter lamented an allegedly overly rational culture, it was as if Huizinga deplored that the dominant culture had apparently heeded their complaints and incorporated their irrational tenets. They denounced the presumed intellectualism of western culture, while Huizinga criticized its alleged anti-intellectualism. For Huizinga, the philosophy of life was not external to western culture but had become a major (and highly problematic) component of it.

The difference in attitude also showed itself in Huizinga’s positive appreciation of science, which for him embodied the intellectual principle or the *will to knowledge*. This refers to the culturally sanctioned imperative to extend scientific knowledge for its own sake and not in the service of the striving for power or of utilitarian ends. He considered the so-called crisis of modern physics in the early 20th century as a sign of health and not as a part of the wider cultural crisis, because it showed science at the limits, and therefore at the height of its thinking power: “It is the refinement of the means of understanding and the intensification of the will to knowledge itself which lie at the bottom of the ailment” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 39). The only thing to be deplored, according to Huizinga, was that the new knowledge had not yet settled in culture and become the common property of civilized persons: “It has not yet been integrated in a new cosmic conception of illuminating harmony” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 35). He apparently deemed it desirable that the new scientific insights of modern physics would in broad outline become part of the worldview of laypersons. By way of historical parallel, we can point to the great insights and discoveries of 17th century natural science, which around 1700 were incorporated, as a “new image of nature” in the general culture and thus became the common property of almost all educated people (Huizinga 1949 [1933], 345).

Huizinga defended science also against the sceptical views of his great-nephew Menno ter Braak, who was a trained historian, writer and literary critic, and an ardent admirer of Nietzsche, the great master of suspicion who relentlessly *unmasked* all art, science, and religion as so many disguises of the will-to-power (Henrard 1963). In his book *Politicus zonder partij* (‘politician without a party’), Ter

Braak had attempted in Nietzschean style to unmask the claims of scientists to be part of a higher, spiritual culture:

Nobody – and the man of science is no exception to this rule – wants to be known as utterly useless. That is why he justifies his utility “from on high”; that is why he, the naturally mediocre but diligent worker-bee, continually poses as a spiritual human being. Take away the spiritual and the ‘higher’, unmask the spiritual conspiracy ... and the libraries and laboratories house only ants, ants, continuously busy to drag along little straws and pine needles for the ant-heap, which they baptised Science. (Ter Braak 1934, 205)

In a letter to his great-nephew, Huizinga objected to the latter’s Nietzschean views on science:

I still think, if you’ll excuse me, that your entire disavowal of knowledge, your reversal of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’, your ‘immoralism’, are rather cheap, with however much talent you present them. Just one word about [what you say on science]. – While reading these passages, I saw before my eyes some younger physicists and biologists, who I know well and esteem highly, and I saw against your contempt the unfathomable contempt, expressed in a smile, with which they would answer yours, and I saw you curl up into a withered leaf and be blown away. (Huizinga 2010 [1935])

There is no doubt that Ter Braak, as a self-declared Nietzschean, exemplified for Huizinga the disavowal of the intellectual principle, which he considered the central tenet of the cultural crisis. Indeed, Nietzsche himself, the great inspirator of the philosophy of life, had been one of the first who “repudiated the intellectual principle,” albeit “with all the poetical vigour of his genius” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 64). The friendly contacts Huizinga maintained with several natural scientists and mathematicians (for example, Willem de Sitter, Lourens Baas Becking, Jan Burgers, Eduard Jan Dijksterhuis) prevented him from looking down upon their work and denigrating the cultural significance of science.

### **Existential philosophy as part of the “mighty stream” of anti-intellectualism**

The philosophy of life was not the only school of thought with which Huizinga found fault. In his view it was only one contributory current that eventually was to merge with several other “tendencies” into one single “mighty stream” of anti-intellectualism (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 64), which threatened to undermine the bulwarks of our intellectual culture. These other currents are historical materialism, pragmatism, the sociology of knowledge, and the existential

philosophy of Heidegger and Jaspers. We should furthermore keep in mind that under the philosophy of life Huizinga also subsumed racial doctrines and the legal-political theory of the amoral nature of the State.

We thus see the broad scope of Huizinga’s cultural diagnosis of anti-intellectualism. How could he possibly deal with all these intellectual currents, together making up a large part of the philosophical landscape of his age? How could he plausibly argue that they all contributed to the prevalent atmosphere of anti-intellectualism? These questions are the more pressing, as Huizinga, by his own admission, had an “almost complete absence of interest” in philosophy (Huizinga 1968 [1947] 215). Of course, we should take this admission with a grain of salt. Huizinga was well-acquainted with at least some philosophers, as he showed in his inaugural lecture at the start of his academic career (Huizinga 1968 [1905]). Here he used the work of Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert, Georg Simmel, and Eduard Spranger to define the proper task of the science of history.

An important but often overlooked source of information and guide about the confusing debates raging in philosophy was Reinier Beerling’s *Antithesen*, the debut work of a young philosopher of history which was published just before *Shadow* and for which Huizinga himself had written a preface to commend it to the public’s attention. As the latter wrote in his preface, “With his lively and well-documented argument the author leads us straight into the midst of the enormous crisis of modern thinking” (Huizinga 1935). Beerling had therefore strengthened Huizinga’s awareness that there was indeed a “general spiritual crisis” in modern thinking: “Over the entire domain of the mind the alarm-bell is sounding [...]” (Beerling 1935, 129).

Beerling was one of the first philosophers in the Netherlands who, in the fourth chapter of his *Antithesen*, extensively discussed Martin Heidegger’s work. He thereby also made Huizinga familiar with this philosophy (“M. Heidegger’s bewildering existential philosophy,” as Huizinga described it in his preface). Beerling’s appraisal of Heidegger’s (and Jaspers’) philosophy probably provided the justification for Huizinga to include existential philosophy among the currents of thought held to be contributing to the “mighty stream” of anti-intellectualism. Beerling argued that existential philosophy largely shared the anti-intellectual thrust of the philosophy of life:

[...] the philosophy of life and existential thinking find each other [...] inasmuch as both attribute to the sciences a ‘derivative’ character; indeed, in Heidegger’s ontology the disparagement of the cognitive function receives a particularly sharp accent. (Beerling 1935, 251)

Beerling similarly criticized the “radically anti-intellectualist mentality” of Karl Jaspers:



Universal validity and absolute standards are now truly suspended; in their place functions as truth criterion *der Wille selbst, der bejaht oder abstöszt* ['the will itself, which either affirms or repels'], which in the ears of a scientifically oriented philosophy must sound as downright blasphemy. (Beerling 1935, 190)

Not only did both philosophies share an anti-intellectual tendency, Beerling also suggested that existential philosophy could be considered as just a variant of the philosophy of life. The special terminology of *Dasein* ('existence') should not deceive us:

Where Heidegger talks about *Dasein*, he could also have said 'life', two concepts with an equally undifferentiated impress; that he avoids 'life' can be partly explained from his aversion to use terms worn off by extensive usage, and also because the word 'Da-sein' allows him to use special etymological derivations for the purpose of ontological clarification. (Beerling 1935, 250)

Not surprisingly, Heidegger and his followers disagreed with this assimilation and emphasized the distinct status of *Dasein* as against "life" (Heidegger 1993 [1927], 50, 246). Still, by many relative outsiders, existential philosophy and the philosophy of life were indeed seen as next-door neighbours (cf. Ertel 1938; Kastein 1938).

Huizinga agreed with Beerling's negative overall appraisal of existential philosophy. In *Shadow* he wrote:

The next addition of intellectually fashionable words will doubtless be 'existential'. I can see it springing up on all sides. Before long it will have landed with the public at large. When, in order to convince one's audience of profundity, one has said 'dynamic' long enough, it will be 'existential'. The word will serve to forsake the spirit all the more solemnly, a sneer at all that is knowledge and truth. (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 67)

We should notice that this passage occurs as the opening paragraph of Chapter XI on "The worship of life," which suggests that Huizinga also viewed existential philosophy as a variant of the philosophy of life. In prophesying the future success of *existential* as an intellectually fashionable word, he has been credited with a special gift of foresight, as if he already predicted the post-war popularity of Sartre's existentialism (Hermans 1968). In the mid-1930s, however, such possibilities were far from Huizinga's mind. Besides, it was Beerling who had already noted that "the word 'existence' has swept like a whirlwind across the entire language area of philosophy [...]" (Beerling 1935, 195).

### The *Seinsverbundenheit* of thought

We have now reviewed two currents of thought embodying the disavowal of the intellectual principle. What about the other contributory tendencies to the “mighty stream” of anti-intellectualism: pragmatism, historical materialism, and the sociology of knowledge?

The case of pragmatism is quite straightforward. It is included because of its relativization of the notion of truth: “Pragmatism deprived the concept truth of its claim to absolute validity by placing it in the flow of time. To the pragmatists truth is what has essential value for those professing it” (Huizinga 2019 [1936]), 64; translation adapted).<sup>1</sup>

Historical materialism and the sociology of knowledge are condemned in one single stroke:

Sociological thinkers like Max Weber, Max Scheler, Karl Mannheim, and Oswald Spengler have of late introduced the term of the *Seinsverbundenheit des Denkens*, which may be very imperfectly rendered with ‘the environment of life-conditioned nature of thought’. The concept itself makes them next-door neighbours to historical materialism, which is professedly anti-intellectual. (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 64)

It may not be immediately clear why Huizinga thought historical materialism to be “professedly anti-intellectual.” Elsewhere, he held Marxism, alongside Freudianism, in large measure responsible for the relativization of moral standards (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 88), which for him was closely linked to the disavowal of the intellectual principle. Huizinga considered ethics and knowledge to be intimately connected: “For ultimately every ethical judgment is an act of cognition” (82; translation adapted). For us, this connection may be less obvious. The more basic reason to consider historical materialism anti-intellectual was apparently that it subscribed to the idea of the *Seinsverbundenheit des Denkens*, an idea which it allegedly shared with the four sociological thinkers mentioned and which would make the latter by implication equally anti-intellectual. In this connection it must be noted that Huizinga had probably only limited familiarity with the work of Weber, Scheler, and Mannheim, although he knew Spengler’s work very well.

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<sup>1</sup> In the book reporting on his visit to the United States in the mid-1920s, Huizinga had given a rather favourable judgment of American pragmatism (Huizinga 1972 [1926]). He was especially enamoured with the generally optimistic and constructive can-do attitude of pragmatist thinkers like William James and John Dewey. He had earlier drawn on James’ insights into the varieties of religious experience in *The waning of the Middle Ages* (Huizinga 1955 [1924]). In *Shadow* he now put pragmatism in a more negative light due to its relativist conception of truth.

Let us therefore look more closely at the *Seinsverbundenheit des Denkens*, to use the German expression which caused the translator (Huizinga's son Jacob Herman) so much difficulty (in the Dutch original it was simply left untranslated). This expression had been coined by Karl Mannheim to serve as the guiding principle for the sociology of knowledge, the new discipline that he and Max Scheler had officially launched in the 1920s. In Mannheim's later English works the expression *Seinsverbundenheit* is usually rendered as "existential determination" or "situational determination," with the explicit proviso that the word *determination* should not be taken as aiming at a mechanical cause-effect sequence (cf. Mannheim 1936, 239). A more appropriate alternative, then, would have been *existential conditioning* or *situational conditioning*. More recently, the notably literal translation "existential connectedness" has also been suggested (Meja & Stehr 2016 [1990]). When Mannheim talked of being (*Sein*) or existence, he did not approach these terms in the sense the existential philosophers did, but always intended to refer to social being or social existence. In this respect his usage was closer to that of Karl Marx. Indeed, the latter gave a classic (although rather one-sidedly deterministic) formulation of the principle involved: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx 1859). It is therefore true that the tenet of the *Seinsverbundenheit des Denkens* makes Mannheim and Scheler, as Huizinga said, "next-door neighbours to historical materialism" (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 64). Arguably, this also applies to Spengler's theory of the life cycle of cultures, insofar as each culture was supposed to have its own standards of valid knowledge. But Spengler ticked other boxes as well because he was also a prominent exponent of the philosophy of life (Boterman 1992; Hughes 1952). One could have some reservation, however, about lumping Max Weber together with the other three so-called sociological thinkers, in view of his emphasis on the value-neutrality of scientific inquiry.

From the way Huizinga used the notion of "existence-conditioned thought" (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 68), it transpires that he considered the idea of the "existential conditioning of thought" as virtually coterminous with the "subjugation of the will to knowledge to the vital impulse" and the "disavowal of the intellectual principle" (63-66), so that the three expressions could be employed interchangeably. *Existence-conditioned thought* was in his view a form of thought that let itself be guided by fanciful allegories and wishful thinking, while suppressing the critical intellect. Hence, according to Huizinga, the ascendancy of the concept of myth, which was even taken as a guide-rule for life, and the priority accorded to *mythos* over *logos*. More specifically Huizinga noted, "The order of precedence of blood and spirit has been completely reversed by the apostles of the life philosophy" (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 69): in the new racial mythology the

*spirit* functioned only in the service of the *blood*. Here the life philosophy was treated as closely related if not identical to the Nazi ideology of *blood and soil*.

For Huizinga, the French thinker Georges Sorel represented a person in whom all (or at least a great many) anti-intellectual tendencies of the age had come together with rather ominous consequences. After enumerating the various currents making up the “mighty stream,” Huizinga concluded a long paragraph with the following punchline: “It was Georges Sorel who, in his *Réflexions sur la Violence* [‘Reflections on violence’], formulated the practical political consequences of all this, thereby becoming the spiritual father of all modern dictatorships” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 64).

It may be illuminating to elaborate on this example a little further. Sorel is indeed often seen as an intellectual forerunner of fascism and, less often, of communism (Wiardi Beckman 1931, 172-173;<sup>2</sup> Mannheim 1936, 120-121; Hughes 1961, 161-182). At one time he admired both Mussolini and Lenin. From his biography we also know that Sorel was inspired by Bergson’s philosophy of life and William James’ pragmatism, after an earlier infatuation with Marxism. He was also considered, by the American sociologist Robert Merton, to be an early French contributor to the sociology of knowledge (Merton 1968, 544). When Huizinga said that Sorel drew the practical political consequences from “all this,” we therefore have at least four components in his thought that supposedly contributed to the “mighty stream” threatening our intellectual culture. Sorel’s doctrine of the indispensability of myths in social and political life and his justification of violence can be added as constituting further disturbing elements. For Huizinga, Sorel surely embodied the “systematic philosophical and practical anti-intellectualism [...] we are witnessing” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 65). He personified the link between the general cultural crisis and the rise of totalitarianism. The examples of Heidegger and Spengler could also have been chosen to show a personal link between an anti-intellectual creed and totalitarianism.

Of course, such linear genealogies are always contestable. Many would be willing to draw a direct line from Nietzsche’s doctrine of the will-to-power to the Nazis, but the example of anti-fascist Nietzscheans like Thomas Mann, André Gide, and Menno ter Braak militates against such a simple construal. The view that Sorel was an intellectual forerunner of fascism has also been disputed (De Kadt 1948 [1938]; Van Stokkom 1992). This by no means implies that one should not exercise proper vigilance towards the potentially dangerous political consequences

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<sup>2</sup> Huizinga was Wiardi Beckman’s academic supervisor in 1931 when the latter defended his historical dissertation on French syndicalism, which contains an extensive discussion and highly critical appraisal of Sorel’s views.

contained in certain forms of thought. Huizinga held his great-nephew to account for the Nietzschean views he endorsed, even challenging him with the provocative question "What has prevented you to become an ardent Nazi?" (Huizinga 2010 [1935]). After the defeat of Nazi Germany, Thomas Mann also reassessed the Nietzschean legacy. One of Nietzsche's biggest and most fateful mistakes, Mann now conceded, was that he saw morality and the intellect exercising undue power over the vital instincts, "as if it were necessary to defend life against spirit!" (Mann 1948). At this point Mann's reappraisal fully agrees with Huizinga's view on Nietzsche and his followers.

Huizinga's judgment of the political tenor of the philosophy of life was nonetheless also rather one-sided, based on a selective choice of examples. Whenever he talked about "the apostles of the life-philosophy" (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 69, 82), he had in mind proto-fascist thinkers of the so-called Conservative Revolution who were intellectually close to the Nazis. For him, it was only a small step from life to *blood and soil*. The *Lebensphilosophie* of Weimar Germany is often tarred with the brush of being a precursor of Nazism, but among adherents there were also left-leaning life-philosophers like Theodor Lessing.<sup>3</sup> The situation in the Netherlands was perhaps even more variegated, especially during the 1920s. Here, the philosophy of life was, alongside neo-Hegelianism, a central plank of a broad so-called humanitarian movement outside academia, encompassing a motley of diverse groups like religious socialists and religious anarchists, adherents of theosophy, conscientious objectors, practical idealists and other do-gooders, Dostoevsky admirers, wisdom seekers, neo-romantic mavericks and youth clubs for outdoor recreation and the study of nature (Brolsma 2015). Many religious socialists who were part of this humanitarian movement aligned themselves politically with the *Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij* ('Social-Democratic Workers Party'), and some of them (Willem Banning, Herman Bernard Wiardi Beckman) were to play a large role in freeing this party from the shackles of Marxism during the 1930s. The political colour of the philosophy of life was much more variegated and ambiguous than Huizinga's cultural criticism allowed. His view is surprisingly similar to the account that was to be given almost twenty years later by the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács, who in retrospect saw the philosophy of life paving the road to Hitler (Lukács 1981 [1954]). The difference,

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<sup>3</sup> Skidelsky warns against "the fallacy of interpreting Weimar intellectual life under the rubric 'bad Right' versus 'good Left'" (Skidelsky 2008, 176). Even a notorious antisemite like Ludwig Klages was not just a "second-rate protofascist" (Skidelsky 2008, 176), as he was made out by Georg Lukács. His criticism of technology has been influential among Marxist thinkers like Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin.

of course, is that Huizinga considered Marxism as part of the problem, not the solution.

### **A closer look at the sociology of knowledge**

Given Huizinga’s use of the *Seinsverbundenheit des Denkens* (‘existential conditioning of thought’) as an alternative formula for the “disavowal of the intellectual principle” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 63), it appears that the plausibility and tenability of his diagnosis of the cultural crisis would demand a more thorough-going engagement with the sociology of knowledge.

Huizinga had criticized existence-conditioned thought for its tendency to indulge in fantasies and wish-dreams unchecked by critical reasoning. There may indeed be many examples of this tendency among those to whom he referred as “the apostles of the life-philosophy” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 69 and 82), but it is not a fair criticism of Mannheim, who had formulated the *Seinsverbundenheit des Denkens* as the guiding principle for the new sociology of knowledge. This tenet was not meant as a licence for uncritically surrendering oneself to fanciful dreams and wishful thinking. In formulating his principle, Mannheim pointed at the general circumstance that the views held by persons and groups, especially those on social and political matters, are often closely related to their positions in society and to their sociopolitical aims and aspirations. This connection is by now widely recognized and is in its generality hardly open to dispute.

On reflection, Huizinga would probably have accepted the general correlation between social positions and theoretical views but might still have been concerned about the implications to be drawn from this recognition.<sup>4</sup> This is at least suggested by the final paragraph of Chapter X in the Dutch original of *Shadow*, which has been omitted in the English version. In translation, this passage runs as follows:

For the time being it remains an open question to what extent the inevitable recognition of the ‘*Seinsverbundenheit, Situationsverbundenheit*’ [‘existential conditioning, situational conditioning’] of thought has brought a greater clarity for cultural consciousness, and to what extent, if conceived

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<sup>4</sup> In *Homo ludens* (1938), Huizinga subscribed to the Durkheimian thesis about the close connection between the dualistic social structure of Indigenous tribes and their worldviews: “Anthropology has shown with increasing clarity how social life in the archaic period normally rests on the antagonistic and antithetical structure of the community itself, and how the whole mental world of such a community corresponds to this profound dualism” (Huizinga 1949 [1938], 53).

too exclusively, it might usher in the downfall of culture.<sup>5</sup> (Huizinga 1950 [1935], 360)

Here Huizinga seems to admit that the existential conditioning of thought cannot be denied but must be recognized as inevitable. On the other hand, he also feared that this insight might be "conceived too exclusively," in which case it might even lead to the downfall of civilization. The meaning of this phrase and therefore of the entire paragraph is however far from clear, which may be the reason why the paragraph has been omitted in the English version of the book.

Mannheim's sociology of knowledge was not simply a programme of empirical inquiry into the possible connections between social backgrounds and theoretical views; rather he set out a broader philosophical and political agenda in which this inquiry was to be integrated. It is possible to accept the empirical part and to reject the broader agenda.

Mannheim saw his own sociology of knowledge as a generalization and radicalization of the so-called criticism of ideology, which from its Marxist beginnings had developed into a universally used weapon with which various political parties in Weimar Germany attacked each other's positions, thereby engaging in "reciprocal unmasking" (Mannheim 1936, 37). For an apolitical person like Huizinga, such an aggressive practice of unmasking or "the tearing off of disguises" (Mannheim 1936, 35) must have felt offensive to good taste.<sup>6</sup> It would have reminded him of the "unquenchable unmasking rage" (*onstilbare demaskeerwoede*) with which Ter Braak went about to relentlessly puncture all sacrosanct illusions of high culture (Van Duinkerken 1967, 192) and on which Huizinga had criticized his great-nephew in their personal correspondence. Mannheim agreed that "radical unmasking" had dire consequences; it led to "the collapse of confidence in thought in general," so that "more and more people took flight into scepticism or irrationalism" (Mannheim 1936, 37). Nonetheless, he held that his sociology of knowledge offered a way out of the impasse: "For this relativism and scepticism compel self-criticism and self-control and lead to a new conception of objectivity" (Mannheim 1936, 42).

To many, however, the attempt looked more like a desperate Munchhausen operation. Digging ever deeper into the social soil from which our

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<sup>5</sup> "Het blijft voorloopig een open vraag, in hoeverre de onvermijdelijke erkenning der 'Seinsverbundenheit, Situationsverbundenheit' van het denken een verheldering van het cultuurbewustzijn is geweest, en in hoeverre zij, al te exclusief opgevat, den ondergang van een cultuur zou kunnen inleiden."

<sup>6</sup> In his book on Erasmus, Huizinga wrote: "He who pulls off the masks in the comedy of life is ejected" (Huizinga 1957 [1924], 71).

intellectual convictions are thought to spring does not enable us to extricate ourselves from the existential determination of thought. Mannheim’s idea of a “socially unattached intelligentsia” (*freischwebende Intelligenz*) supposedly exempt from ideological distortion (Mannheim 1936, 137), was widely ridiculed as a glaring inconsistency of his sociological approach.

One may fully accept the existential conditioning of thought as a general fact of life and still be concerned about the implications to be drawn from this recognition. If attention is shifted completely from the substantive views at issue in a dispute to the social backgrounds of the disputants, this can indeed lead to a disavowal of the intellectual principle. The danger of this shift is, as Karl Popper once put it, that serious arguments are no longer taken seriously (Popper 1974 [1945], 251-252). Take the intriguing example of a possible bias in theories about sexual selection within evolutionary biology. It has been suggested that these theories reflect gender stereotypes that were current in certain social circles, the purported bias being that the females in the animal kingdom are invariably depicted as unduly passive in mating and sex, in line with Victorian ideals of (human) femininity (Cooke 2022). This is an interesting correlation that might be a useful reminder about the possible influence of social prejudice. However, the way to resolve the substantive issue is not by examining the social backgrounds of the evolutionary biologists ever more closely, but by further testing the theories in question and collecting more evidence about the mating behaviour of female (and male) animals.

Mannheim was also reluctant to accept the traditional epistemological distinction between the social genesis and the validity of judgments (Mannheim 1936, 22 and 258), but maintaining this distinction is essential if we want to prevent that the recognition of the existential conditioning of human thought has the anti-intellectual effect so much feared by Huizinga. When this distinction is blurred, it is indeed all too easy to focus one’s attention not on the empirical evidence that militates for or against a particular theoretical view, but exclusively on the motives or interests by which those who bring forward this view are supposedly led. It is then only a small next step to dismiss, for example, Einstein’s theory of relativity as *Jewish pseudo-science* and to put a *German physics* in its place (Richter 1980), or to unmask Mendelian genetics as *bourgeois science* and demand a *Soviet agrobiology* instead (Huxley 1949).<sup>7</sup> We see this tendency also in our own age, for example, when the scenario of global warming in climate science is depicted as a ploy devised by “red dressed in green” socialists, intent on

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<sup>7</sup> Huizinga referred to such “strange concoctions like Marxian or Nordic mathematics which some in all seriousness would have us accept” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 38-39), but he apparently treated them as no more than exceptional curiosities.



destroying the American way of life (Oreskes & Conway 2010, 254), or when the controversies around the Covid-19 pandemic assume the character of a political culture war (Horton 2022). All this can lead to an atmosphere of paralyzing relativism and scepticism, in which every scientific hypothesis or theory is an immediate candidate for *unmasking* and *debunking*.

### Then and now

Huizinga’s criticism of the “disavowal of the intellectual principle” is still relevant today (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 63), although the tendency he took issue with has taken new forms. The urge to unveil and debunk, nurtured by systematic suspicion and distrust, previously realized itself in various forms of ideological criticism but currently finds a new outlet in formulating and spreading all kinds of conspiracy theories (Coper 2022). The fact that such theories are eagerly embraced by large segments of the public, seems also to testify to the weakening of judgment and the decline of the critical spirit highlighted by Huizinga. In the filter bubbles and echo chambers of social media platforms only the voices of like-minded people are being heard; the dissident messages of others are carefully shut out. Emotions carry more weight than scientifically established facts in shaping the outcomes of public debates. It will not be difficult for present-day readers to illustrate Huizinga’s pessimistic argument with numerous topical examples.

The place once taken by the philosophy of life and existential philosophy in the western cultural landscape is currently filled by postmodernism and its many varieties (Wight 2018). Some tenets of the philosophy of life find remarkable resonance among the more radical forms of contemporary environmentalism.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud – the “masters of suspicion” as Paul Ricoeur called them (Ricoeur 1970, 32) – have many disciples among the genealogists and deconstructionists who tirelessly keep on unmasking the idols of humanism and reason (Ferry 2019). We can also point to the similarity between the old sociology of knowledge and social constructionism in contemporary science studies. One prominent practitioner in the latter field, Bruno Latour, felt terrified when he

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<sup>8</sup> Just one example: the *Dark Mountain Manifesto* exhibits a hostility to culture that is reminiscent of the most radical philosophers of life. The latter already condemned modern civilization for its devastating impacts on Indigenous peoples and the natural environment. Thus, in his book *Mensch und Erde* (‘Man and earth’) (1929), Ludwig Klages wrote: “Under the pretext of ‘profit’, ‘economic development’, ‘culture’, [progress] is intent on the *destruction of life*. It attacks it in all its forms, cuts down forests, extinguishes species, wipes out indigenous peoples, smothers and disfigures the landscape with the varnish of commerce and degrades those living creatures which it spares, like ‘livestock’, into mere merchandise, into the marked objects of an unlimited greed” (quoted in Skidelsky 2008, 175). Some radical environmentalists also recognize an intellectual kinship with Heidegger’s philosophy.

realized that with his critical analyses of scientific practice he had given extremists like climate sceptics a formidable weapon to undermine even the most *bona fide* science (such as climate science): “Dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives. Was I wrong to participate in the invention of this field known as science studies?” (Latour 2004, 227). Other practitioners of science studies also concede that the field may be held partly responsible for the recent rise of post-truth politics (Collins, Evans & Meinel 2017).

The current weaponization of disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories raises a question that had already been raised by Huizinga’s critics: To what extent is the widespread adoption of unscientific or otherwise incredible views to be treated as a cultural issue rather than as a political issue regarding the exercise of power? Jacques de Kadt had retorted to Huizinga that German racism was more a matter of political power than a cultural issue because many of the Nazi leaders themselves (with the exception of some at the very top) did not genuinely believe the official racial theories but cynically exploited them for political purposes (De Kadt 1991 [1936], 100-101). Similarly, Menno ter Braak argued that the Nazi racial doctrine was only the phraseological façade for the *ressentiment* projected on the eternal scapegoat, *the Jew*: “the hatred comes first, the hatred of Jews comes second, and the ‘scientific’ argumentation comes third” (Ter Braak 2019 [1937], 40-41). Philosopher Quassim Cassam makes a similar point about modern-day conspiracy theories: “They are political gambits whose real function is to promote a political agenda. They aren’t ‘just theories’ like any other” (Cassam 2019, 7). If the issue is indeed one of political power, it will not make much sense to understand the wide acceptance of the racial doctrine as a sign of the decline of the critical faculty or even, as Huizinga also did, to attempt a scientific refutation. In our post-truth era we have also found out that merely providing the correct information is not always the best answer to counter the effects of fake news and disinformation (Coper 2022).

Nonetheless, the whole problem deserves far more reflection, if only because the purveyors of *alternative truths* often also hanker after scientific respectability. Huizinga’s refutation of the racial doctrine is still valuable for its simplicity. He pointed out the fallacy that race theorists assume the exclusively biological determination of alleged spiritual race qualities while there is no way to disentangle the effects of race and culture. Nor was he blind to the fact that racial theories were developed and used for political purposes, as can be seen from this ironic commentary:

The argument of race in cultural conflicts is always self-praise. Has a race-theorist ever made the startling and shaming discovery that the race to which he deemed himself to belong is inferior? The motive is always

exaltation of self and kin over others and at the expense of others. The racial thesis is always hostile, always anti, a bad sign for a doctrine which claims to be scientific. The racially inspired attitude is anti-Asiatic, anti-African, anti-proletarian, anti-Semitic. (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 54)

This is after all not so different from the view of his great-nephew Ter Braak, who saw the racial theory of the Nazis as a doctrine of rancour, born from pure *ressentiment*.

At critical moments it is important to deny the peddlers of unscientific theories the academic respectability they so much desire. For Huizinga, such a critical moment arrived in April 1933, when he was rector of the University of Leiden (the entire episode is described in Otterspeer 1997). At that time a week-long international student conference was being held at Leiden, of which Huizinga in his capacity as rector was the honorary chair. The conference had been organized by the International Student Service (ISS), bringing together student delegations from France, Great Britain, and Germany next to Dutch students. The purpose was to promote mutual understanding through a free exchange of views among the participating students – which a few months after Hitler’s accession to power reflected a rather naïve idealism. At the last moment, the composition of the German student delegation changed to the extent that it no longer consisted of students but only of non-students and former students. It was led by Johann von Leers, a convinced Nazi who in the following years was to become a leading official charged with antisemitic propaganda in Germany (Wegner 2007). During the conference, Huizinga was informed that this person was the author of an antisemitic pamphlet entitled *Forderung der Stunde: Juden ’raus!* (‘The call of the hour: Out with the Jews!’), which contained a passage in which Christian parents were warned about Jews intent on committing ritual murder of Christian children. After Von Leers confirmed that he was indeed the author of this pamphlet (it also transpired later that he did not believe the ritual murder myth himself but had no scruples about using it for political propaganda), Huizinga expressed his revulsion and contempt and asked him to no longer avail himself of the hospitality of the university. The conference was terminated early, one day before the scheduled ending. The affair led to a diplomatic row between the Netherlands and Germany and ruffled the feathers of the board of Leiden University, but Huizinga defended his decision by pointing out that “a university [...] has to maintain different standards in questions of honour and dignity than a government” (Otterspeer 1997, 400). Although often castigated by his critics for being unabashedly apolitical, Huizinga did not fail to take decisive action at a critical moment when the respectability of the university was at stake. He refused to grant politically motivated pseudoscience the academic status it demanded.

### The limits of reason and the limits of deconstruction

Huizinga’s criticism of the disavowal of the intellectual principle as the defining tenet of his age did not stem from an overweening rationalism. He was fully aware of the limitations of our intellectual faculties but held that the all-out attack on reason undertaken by so many different schools of thought was disingenuous and even self-contradictory. After all, it always amounted to a futile attempt of *reasoning* reason away, of using the instruments of reason against itself: “To take the anti-noetic [=anti-intellectual] principle seriously and consistently [would be] to deny oneself the power of speech” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 72).

We have also seen that Huizinga had a strong aversion against the relentless urge to unveil and debunk, a seemingly characteristic feature of the modern age. In 1938, he briefly toyed with the idea that modern thought should submit to voluntary self-restraint by refraining from *boring and prying* into layers of consciousness that to him appeared beyond the competence of human reason. Could the 20th century, he asked almost half in despair, perhaps retreat behind “the line Kierkegaard-Dostoevsky-Nietzsche” and start from there all over again (Huizinga 1950 [1938], 455-456)? Although his answer was negative, there is no doubt that this imagined return to naivety and lost innocence would have been an attractive option to him. His reluctance to bore and pry into the deepest layers of consciousness probably had to do with his sense of Christian piety. For Huizinga, faith in human reason was ultimately founded on “a living metaphysical [read: religious] belief” (Huizinga 2019 [1936], 71).

In the 21st century, the French philosopher Luc Ferry also wonders whether we must still follow in the footsteps of Nietzsche and the modern-day *masters of suspicion* like Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze by continuing the seemingly interminable deconstructive work of unmasking the idols of humanism and reason. He holds that the “tireless pursuit of Nietzschean deconstruction” leads in the end only to an uncritical accommodation of the existing economic reality of global capitalism (Ferry 2019, 203-207).

Huizinga probably would have agreed. In *Homo ludens* he criticized the *shameful misconception* that economic forces and material interests determine the course of the world:

This grotesque over-estimation of the economic factor was conditioned by our worship of technological progress, which was itself the fruit of rationalism and utilitarianism after they had killed the mysteries and acquitted man of guilt and sin. But they had forgotten to free him of folly and myopia, and he seemed only fit to mould the world after the pattern of his own banality. (Huizinga 1949 [1938], 192)

The *shameful misconception* may thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once all our idols and mysteries have been killed, it would seem indeed that the world lies finally open to the blind and unrestrained technological dynamics of global capitalism.

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### **Un « puissant courant » d'anti-intellectualisme.**

#### **Johan Huizinga, son époque, et la nôtre**

L'incursion de Johan Huizinga dans la critique culturelle, *In the shadow of tomorrow* (1935/1936), a bénéficié d'un accueil plutôt unilatéral. Elle a été largement interprétée comme une série de plaintes conservatrices sur la technologie moderne et la sur-organisation, sur la détérioration des normes morales et la décadence du style et du bon goût, ainsi que sur l'engloutissement croissant de la vie civile par les exigences de la politique de masse. Les critiques ont également été déçus par l'appel de Huizinga à la catharsis spirituelle et à l'ascèse comme remède à cette prétendue crise de la civilisation occidentale. Si tous ces éléments sont bien présents dans le récit de Huizinga, ils ne touchent pas au fonds de son diagnostic de la crise culturelle. Il désigne lui-même le « désaveu du principe intellectuel » comme le point focal de son diagnostic. Non seulement telle ou telle école de pensée avait rejeté son adhésion à la raison, mais de nombreuses tendances divergentes s'étaient fondues en un « puissant courant » d'anti-intellectualisme. C'était, selon Huizinga, la caractéristique déterminante de l'époque, et elle était à l'origine de la crise culturelle. Elle offre des parallèles et des contrastes intéressants avec notre propre ère « post-vérité » de désinformation, de fausses nouvelles et de théories du complot. Cet article vise à une reconstruction détaillée et à une contextualisation de l'essentiel du diagnostic de Huizinga sur la crise de la civilisation occidentale. Il établit également quelques parallèles provisoires avec l'époque actuelle.

### **Een "machtige stroom" van anti-intellectualisme: Over Johan Huizinga, zijn tijd en onze tijd**

Johan Huizinga's proeve van cultuurkritiek, *In de schaduwen van morgen* (1935), heeft een nogal eenzijdige receptie genoten. Zij is vooral geïnterpreteerd als een serie klachten van een ouderwetse conservatief over moderne techniek en overorganisatie, de verlaging van morele standaarden, stijl- en decorumverlies en de toenemende overheersing van het maatschappelijk leven door de eisen van een op de grote massa gerichte politiek. De critici waren ook niet onder de indruk van Huizinga's roep om een geestelijke katharsis en ascese als oplossing van de vermeende



crisis van de westerse beschaving. Hoewel al deze elementen inderdaad in Huizinga's uiteenzetting aan te treffen zijn, raken zij toch niet de kern van zijn diagnose van de cultuurcrisis. Zelf bestempelde hij de “verzaking van het kennisideaal” als het brandpunt van zijn diagnose. Het was niet enkel dat deze of gene denkrichting zijn trouw aan de rede had opgezegd, maar dat verschillende tendensen waren samengevloeid in één “machtige stroom” van anti-intellectualisme. Voor Huizinga was dit het centrale kenmerk van zijn tijd dat aan de basis van de cultuurcrisis lag. Zijn tijdsdiagnose toont interessante overeenkomsten en verschillen met onze eigen vermeende *post-truth* tijd van desinformatie, *fake news* en complottheorieën. Dit artikel beoogt een gedetailleerde reconstructie en contextualisering van de kern van Huizinga's diagnose van de crisis der westerse beschaving en probeert mogelijke parallellen met de huidige tijd te schetsen.

