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Prison Area, Independence Valley

Rob Kroes

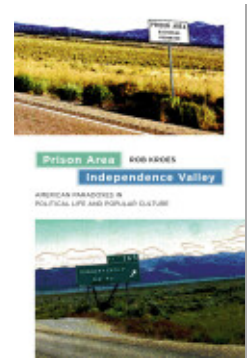
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FOREWORD

Almost two hundred years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville determined to see America for himself and received a commission from the French government to study prison reform in the United States. His proposed study of prisons, of course, became a pretext for something much larger: a survey of American politics and society that became *Democracy in America*. The study of prisons brought Tocqueville to America. For Rob Kroes, one of Europe's most distinguished authorities on contemporary American culture, it was rather the other way around. For Kroes, it was his deep knowledge of American culture that brought him back to America and face to face with a couple of highway signs, Tocquevillian in their portent, that invited motorists to exit from Interstate 80 in Nevada toward a place called Independence Valley and to keep their eyes open for a "Prison Area." In this collection of essays, Kroes invites us to take these two signposts seriously for deepening our insights into America's cultural contradictions, especially how, after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the U.S. government's response to these attacks altered the meaning of America for Americans and Europeans alike.

Kroes's book is part of a long tradition of European commentary on the United States. His essays will certainly invite comparisons with Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, Alexis de Tocqueville, Charles Dickens, Frances Trollope, Matthew Arnold, and, more recently, Jean Baudrillard. But, whether consciously or not, Kroes's

ironic and critical insights, and especially the lyricism of his prose, register more in the key of one of his Dutch forebears, historian Johan Huizinga. Best known for his *Waning of the Middle Ages*, Huizinga wrote two short books about the United States between the world wars, compiled into *America: A Dutch Historian's Vision, from Afar and Near*, about the significance of understanding the meaning of America's rapid modernization for European "Culture" and "Civilization." According to Huizinga, writing at the dawn of what Henry Luce called "The American Century," the United States had perfected the mechanization of life, gained the world, and lost its soul.

Kroes both echoes and updates Huizinga's insights in light of 9/11. For Kroes, it is the waning of the American Century, not of the Middle Ages, that merits our attention. And he brings years of expertise to the task of addressing the contradictions that beset contemporary America. Trained as a sociologist at Leiden University and the University of Amsterdam, Kroes, before accepting his current positions at Utrecht and Ghent universities, occupied the chair of American Studies at the University of Amsterdam and has written or edited dozens of books about American history, politics, and culture (especially photography). His writing has always been marked by a certain "reflexivity," an ability to talk about how and why he is adjusting his lens to capture the images passing in front of him. This book is no exception. He recalls the horror he experienced watching the 9/11 attacks and then the unfolding disbelief across much of Europe as the U.S. government launched a phony war against Iraq with untold consequences for America's political values at home and its credibility overseas.

How to explain America? For Kroes, culture matters. He opens his book with a deft examination of how President George W. Bush's ill-considered war against Iraq led many European intellectuals, including Kroes himself, to an "agonizing reappraisal" of the United States and its exercise of power in international affairs. This essay is followed by Kroes's assess-

ment of Richard Drew's *Falling Man* and how this photograph achieved iconic status in conjunction with Don DeLillo's novel of the same name and Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Never one to underestimate the complexities of cultural formations, Kroes invites us to think about the role of cultural productions in promoting America's rise to becoming a global power. Just when "empire as a way of life," as historian William A. Williams once put it, was taking hold in the United States, so were the musical idioms of jazz and Broadway musicals. Kroes's insights into the creativity of American musical formations are impressive, making clear that we always need to consider the possibility of "cultural reception being critically turned against its originator." Kroes's discussion of the interplay between production and reception, both linked by fundamental human wellsprings of imagination, will give scholars working in cultural studies pause for thought as they continue to grapple with how to understand popular culture and its cultural functions. Perhaps what is most compelling about these essays is this: they move readers beyond questions of "America" and "Americanization" into thinking more generally about the human condition (as in the case of Kroes's marvelous conclusion to his essay "Freaks on Display"). That understanding *what* we see, whether in a film like *Django Unchained* or in photographs taken of the Holocaust, helps make us *who* we are is a point Kroes is keen to drive home through these essays about the power of cultural representations. His deeply humane readings will force readers to examine their own frames of reference for thinking about the Holocaust and more recent iterations of racism and terrorism. His final essay about President Barack Obama and the responses to his presidency pulls together Kroes's interest in understanding the power (and limits) of cultural discourse to refashion America's image in the world after 9/11.

To sum up, *Prison Area, Independence Valley* takes us on a journey into what Huizinga (mistakenly) read as a cultural wasteland. Kroes invites us to take the exit with him from the

interstate highway, to reflect on where and who we are, and then to continue our journey with a sense that no century is safe in the hands of just one nation.

Robert W. Rydell
Montana State University

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