

# INTERPRETING AMERICA IN THE WORKS OF KNUT HAMSUN AND JOHANNES V. JENSEN

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## Sammenfatning

*USA havde en betydelig indflydelse på Knut Hamsun og Johannes V. Jensens forfatterskab. Forfatterne tilbragte begge lange perioder i Amerika, og delte med stor entusiasme deres meninger om landet i bøger og artikler. Deres forskellige holdninger til Amerikansk industrialisering af teknologi samt USAs rolle i verdenen, giver os et glimt af en lille men indflydelsesrig del af debatten om Amerika i de nordiske lande i starten af det tyvende århundrede.*

## Abstract

*The USA had an significant influence on the Nobel Prize-Winning authors Johannes V. Jensen and Knut Hamsun. Both authors spent significant amounts of time in America and subsequently expressed their thoughts and opinions on the country in the form of books and articles. Their diverging views on the topics of technological advancements and America's future role in the world, serve to capture a small but significant part of the larger debate on America's role in the Nordic countries in the early 20th century.*

## Keywords

*America, modernity, technology, farming, Hamsun, fin de siècle*

“What would John Stuart Mill have said now?”<sup>1</sup> Knut Hamsun asks in the 1928 article “Festina Lente” regarding Stuarts Mill’s assessment that technology had simplified human existence. In America Knut Hamsun experienced “the gilded age,” a period of unprecedented rapid change in the history of technological and economic advancement (Larsen 455). It was during this time Hamsun experienced first-hand technological innovations that were to shape the modern world. He held a slew of jobs; working in a lumber yard in Minnesota, as a streetcar conductor in Chicago and most crucially for his later interpretation of industrialised modernity, on large-scale farms in North Dakota, owned by capitalist landowners in Chicago (Næss 81). As a consequence, Hamsun’s literary attack on America in his 1889 book *The Cultural Life of Modern America* was fuelled by the rapid industrialisation of the country that was taking place as much as a distaste for the rustic character of its inhabitants. Hamsun’s commission to write *The Cultural Life of Modern America* was largely a product of lectures he held in the Copenhagen Student Association, which according to the author “roused a quite undeservedly enthusiastic reception” (Letter 050). Indeed, the subject of America quickly lost his interest as he wrote to Danish writer Erik Skram, “Uff! What a book! It interests me not in the slightest. But now that I’ve started on it, it’s got to be finished” (Letter 050). As a result, the book mainly ended up serving as sensationalist publicity for the

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<sup>1</sup> Hvad ville John Stuart Mill have sagt nu? (141).

inexperienced writer wishing to establish a reputation for himself in Copenhagen's literary scene.

Danish Nobel-Prize author Johannes V. Jensen, most famous for his novel *The Fall of the King* (1901) and for his distinct prosaic style of poetry, was equally enthusiastic about sharing his oftentimes controversial ideas on the subject of America. The experience Jensen had in America a few years after Hamsun, and the opinions expressed on the subject, described in works such as the *The Gothic Renaissance* (1901) and *The New World* (1907), serve as a historically valuable counter-thesis to Hamsun's assessment of America, as Jensen in contrast, praises the virtues of American modern industrialised society. Hamsun's article "Farming Culture" (1908), a response to Jensen's *The New World* clearly outlines Hamsun's sceptical position on American industrialisation, as described, but not fully developed in *The Cultural Life of Modern America*. The article expresses a less vehement opposition to America, in which earlier disdain for the American people is replaced with respect for the hard-working American labourers, who must endure the oftentimes harsh conditions bestowed upon them. As such the article published almost two decades after *The Cultural Life of Modern America* serves as an example of Hamsun's continuously evolving opinions on America following his initial publication on the subject as an inexperienced writer. The contrasting views expressed by the two authors on the subject of "America as modernity" thus serves as an example of the debate concerning whether or not American industrialisation should be taken as inspiration in Scandinavia at the turn of the 20th century, when most parts of Scandinavia were rural and still mostly relying on traditional subsistence-based farming methods.

### **Hamsun in America**

"I will surely never again be able to show myself in America" (Letter 053), Hamsun exclaimed following the publication of *The Cultural Life of Modern America*. The book was to become a sensation in the literary world of Copenhagen. It was an exaggerated account of the unsophisticated nature of a country so many Scandinavians had emigrated to in earlier decades. Knut Hamsun had returned from his second American voyage highly disappointed with his experience, and not having achieved what he had originally intended. The result was amongst many things a merciless portrayal of America, a critique of the nation's nationalism, the chaotic state of the judicial system and the poor conditions of its schools. Knut Hamsun's second stay in America between 1886 and 1888 was a defining moment for the aspiring author. In the immediate aftermath, Hamsun developed, a genuine aversion to traditional forms of nationalism and endorsed a form of multiculturalism surprising to scholars familiar with Hamsun's later nationalism and aversion for everything English. In a letter to Danish literary critic Edvard Brandes, Hamsun expresses his own inclination to include foreign words, particularly English ones in his present writing. Hamsun justifies his peculiar use of language by stating that English is "a language that communicates things to me in a more universal way" (Letter 037). In conclusion to his reflection on language he states; "I don't think or feel like a Norwegian any more, but as a European" (Letter 037). Following Hamsun's return from America, and the many hours spent self-educating in Minnesota, Europe represented a more sophisticated literary culture. Returning to Copenhagen meant fulfilling his initial plan to settle in what was then the leading metropolis of Scandinavia and become a successful writer, just as he had attempted and failed to do in 1880. Hamsun was in fact so disinterested in Norway that when Hamsun's ship set anchor in Kristiania, he did not

even bother to disembark (Skavlan 128), as his sense of purpose was fuelled by the desire to reach the literary milieu he wished to become part of in Copenhagen. As such, the rejection of America in *The Cultural Life of Modern America* was also a rejection of his own earlier attempt to succeed in America.

The lectures Hamsun delivered at the Copenhagen Student Association invited a surprisingly enthusiastic reception from the crowd of students. Hamsun wrote that “I have never spoken to a more receptive public. I thought they were all going mad” (Letter 051). Georg Brandes was so enthusiastic that following the lecture he gave an informal speech on the subject of Hamsun, which Hamsun later recalled as being... “the warmest acknowledgment I could ever in my life have wished for” (Letter 051). The success of the lectures resulted in a contract with the Danish publisher P.G. Philipsen which initiated Hamsun’s literary career. Yet, Georg Brandes was also quick to condemn the methods used by Hamsun as simplistic; As he later explained, “Using Hamsun’s method it would be possible to write the same book about any country in the world (Næss 311). Brandes’ enthusiasm for Hamsun was to be short lived; He would according to Næss eventually distance himself from Hamsun following the publication of *Hunger*. Yet, it had enabled the previously unknown writer to step into the ranks of the literary elite in Copenhagen.

While *The Cultural Life of Modern America* is certainly valuable in the world of Hamsun studies, Hamsun scholar Harald Næss emphasises its worthlessness as an insightful commentary on America in the 1880’s. *The Cultural Life of Modern America* aimed at satisfying its audience’s lust for sensationalism, typical of travel writing of the period. Here stood a young man claiming that the large country’s patriotism, its writers, painters, sculptors, all embodied a misinformed conception of freedom. Furthermore, Næss claims most of Hamsun’s observations in the book are misleading and inconclusive, as Hamsun would mostly have spent his time there with other Scandinavians, rather than Americans (Næss 309). On top of that, many of the sources were haphazardly chosen, based on articles that Hamsun happened to possess as well as resources on America available in Copenhagen libraries such as the Encyclopaedia Britannica (310). As Harald Næss asserts, most of Hamsun’s opinions were already set in stone when he undertook the project. In this regard, the project merely served as advertisement for a young writer with few connections and little financial means. Yet, Hamsun’s opinions on America reveal a desire to become part of a deeply rooted European literary tradition and thus overcome the obstacles of his humble beginnings.

### **Jensen in America**

Danish Nobel prize-winning author Johs. V. Jensen, labelled as Hamsun’s literary twin (Nesby 69), was inspired by Hamsun’s writing to travel to America (Nedergaard 1968). Contrary to Hamsun, Jensen was deeply impressed with what he saw, especially in terms of technological advancements. Following an early infatuation with Hamsun’s writing, Jensen published *Einar Elkær (1898)* a novel closely resembling Hamsun’s *Mysteries (1892)*. Jensen evolved from a decadent psychological novelist into what Linda Nesby calls an optimist for the future,<sup>2</sup> as Jensen embraced modern science and technology, and became increasingly absorbed with ideas revolving around America and the United Kingdom (Nesby 81). As such Jensen was quick to embrace America as the ultimate incarnation of modernity and technological progress. Jensen, who had previously studied

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<sup>2</sup> “fremtidsoptimist.”

medicine at the University of Copenhagen, developed a strong interest in Darwinism and anthropology which contributed to a pseudo-scientific theory emphasising the “Jutish” origins of the first English settlers of America which resulted in Jensen’s strong allegiance to the United States and England. It is important to note that Jensen’s concepts and definitions of “Jutish,” “Anglo-Saxon,” “Gothic” and “Nordic” were as unclear then as they are today, and oftentimes used interchangeably.

Jensen first travelled to America in 1896. As opposed to Hamsun, Jensen at no point experienced the necessity to undertake physical labour while staying in the country. As a consequence, Jensen did not interact with working-class American society. Consequently, Jensen’s stays in America differ most significantly from Hamsun’s in their very nature as self-educational voyages, in the style of a “modern Grand Tour,” rather than transformative or financially beneficial ones as in the case of Hamsun. Jensen came to America, as he himself explains in *Fra Fristaterne* (1934), with money earned from his first publication (17). As he describes, he recalls a road less travelled when he in 1896, chose to experience America;

Why did it have to be America at that time. Contemporary literature of the time pointed in all other directions, young artists’ educational voyages were still centred around Italy, like in the time of Thorvaldsen, or for the most fashionable Paris. Yes, something lay in the air, like great birds that a hunter senses in the midst of large grounds. And there was something in America, as everyone can see a lifetime afterwards<sup>3</sup>(*Fra Fristaterne* 18).

Jensen was immediately fascinated by the energy found in America and its many technological advancements in comparison with the still relatively old-fashioned way of life in Denmark, and he transported these ideas into his vision of modern America. Jon Helt Haarder explains how a mix of different approaches resulted in Jensen’s early adaptation of his “grand narrative of Nordic Race as ancestors to Columbus, modern America and industrial modernity” (Haarder 172). Jensen was the first Danish author of notable significance to endorse the idea of the Anglo-Saxon world as superior based on “industrialisation” and “modernisation.” Based on the technological advancements achieved in America and England, Jensen created a lifelong belief in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon culture and more problematically, its people. Jensen believed the early Jutish settlements in the south of England created a special relationship between England and his native Jutland. In the poem *The Song of England*,<sup>4</sup> Jensen’s belief in shared ancestry is clearly expressed...: “But still common heritage and circumstance/ to the same old acreage us binds. *England!*”<sup>5</sup> As a result, Jensen’s writings on the subject of America mostly celebrate the country’s achievements and as such glorify its population of “Anglo-Saxon” heritage. Jensen’s book *The Gothic Renaissance* is a particularly striking example of this trend in his writing. Written as a result of his reports on the Spanish-American war, the book follows the Americans to victory and proffers spiteful commentary on the

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<sup>3</sup> Hvorfor skulle det være America på det tidspunkt datidens litteratur var dog rettet all andre Steder hen end nettop den Vej, unge Kunstneres Studierejser gik endnu til Italien, som Thorvaldsens Tid, eller for de nyest orienteredes Vedkommende til Paris. Ja noget laa i Luften, ligesom store Fugle en Jæger har et inde over fern jagtområder. Og der var ogsaa noget i Amerika, som Enhver kan se nu en menneskealder efter (*Fra Fristaterne* 18).

<sup>4</sup> Englandssangen.

<sup>5</sup> Men endnu bunder fælles Arv og Kaar/i samme gamle gaard. *England!* (28-30 p. 256).

Spanish people. Jensen disparages the Spanish on notions of race to explain and justify their ultimate defeat at the hands of the more “advanced” Americans. Jensen’s simplified perception of war, is that of a battle between races, as Jensen believes those who are “naturally” superior will prevail. Jensen writes the following about the Spanish-American war and the subsequent American victory... “It was much more than just two nations facing each other, these were two deeply different races, two mutually hostile expressions of human nature.”<sup>6</sup> As such, Jensen expresses how he is convinced the American war is, in effect, a battle for the sake of all “Gothic” peoples.... “From the first journey onwards, I had the joy of being on the side that had to win. It was the Gothic spirit that won.”<sup>7</sup> Jensen’s use of the verb “maatte” (had to) punctuates his racial understanding of the conflict, as it implies an inevitable outcome based on the race’s “natural” superiority. As Jensen concludes; “Undoubtedly this race, that I there saw, was subordinate”(28).<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Jensen paints an unflattering portrait of the Spanish locals and their customs, and heavily emphasises what he perceives as his own racial “foreignness” among the Spanish. The Spanish are described by Jensen as regressive and absorbed by their Catholic faith, as well as having “roman barbarian tendencies”<sup>9</sup> (29), a comment relating to the Spanish appreciation of bullfighting.

Jensen concludes;

In the assumption that a fight is currently being undertaken more in terms of race than territory, I prophesy that the Spanish people will be obliterated from the peoples<sup>10</sup>

This statement as well as Jensen’s aforementioned problematic beliefs, demonstrate to what extent Jensen’s ideas of America and Americans are founded in his pseudo-scientific theories of race rather than enthusiasm for American democracy and technological advancements. Jensen, reporting from Spain, eagerly observed as the nations reshuffled their cards towards a new Anglo-American alliance. In ultimate dedication to the cause of America, Jensen perceived the burgeoning American empire as an embodiment of the Gothic, or Jutish spirit, and utilised this to justify America’s controversial implementation of the Monroe Doctrine.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the most difficult legacy Jensen and Hamsun in America for modern readers are their troubling depictions of America’s underprivileged minorities. In both cases, their attacks on American minorities were pseudo-scientific in nature and largely aimed at America’s black and indigenous populations. This aspect, especially in the case of Hamsun and *The Cultural Life of Modern America*, has sparked the interest of several recent Hamsun scholars. Monika Žagar’s *Knut Hamsun: The Dark Side of Literary Brilliance*, as well as Peter Sjølyst Jackson’s *Troubling Legacies*, are both extensive studies of Hamsun’s darker legacy. Hamsun’s fascistic legacy has been

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<sup>6</sup> Det var ikke alene to Nationer, der stod Ansigt til Ansigt, men to dybt forskellige Racer, to hindandens dødsfjendtlige Naturer (28).

<sup>7</sup> Fra Første Færd havde jeg imidlertid den Lykke at staa paa det Parti, der maatte sejre. Det var den Gotiske Natur, der sejrede (28).

<sup>8</sup> Det var utvilsomt at denne Race, jeg dér saa, var en underlegen (28).

<sup>9</sup> romanske barbartilbøjligheder (29).

<sup>10</sup> i Forvisningen om, at her netop nu forestaar en Kamp mere af Race- end a Territorialhensyn, profeterer jeg, det spanske Folk skal udslettes af Folkene. (30-31).

widely debated since his arrest and trial in 1947. Žagar, is ultimately astonished at the mostly sympathetic approach many scholars and authors have adopted in relation to Hamsun's relationship with fascism, most notably in Thorkild Hansen's widely popular *Processen mod Hamsun* (1978), in which Hansen transposes most of the blame for Hamsun's involvement with Nazism on Marie Hamsun, his wife. According to Žagar, the trilogy's adaptation into film has sparked a revival of interest in Hamsun, and simultaneously a string of apologist misreadings of Hamsun's challenging and complicated legacy. In her book, Žagan proposes that Hamsun's *The Cultural Life of Modern America*, among his other earlier writings, is not only a critique of the "culture" of America but serves as a revealing premonition for Hamsun's future engagement with fascism. In a similar spirit, Sjølyst Jackson asserts that "it is indefensible, however, to proceed simply by tracking down and isolating those vile racist moments, without considering how these, in fact, supplement something else" (16). Criticism questioning Hamsun's authoritarian background already existed in the form of Leo Löwenthal's assessment of Hamsun in his *Literature and the Image of Man* (1966), which links Hamsun's submission to authoritarianism to his literary characters' submission to the power of nature. Indeed, on several occasions, scholars have interrogated Hamsun's prejudice towards black Americans in their work. Harald Næss posits that Hamsun's living conditions in America were dire, and theorises his racist attitude stemmed from reactionary contempt as an impoverished white person, writing: "The statements about the negro are the most tactless; here Hamsun's language approaches the worst abusive slang of the poor white. But then it is also from their level he views the problem: the white laborer fearing competition and reacting to the eating habits and sexual vigour of his black comrade" (311). Monika Žagar similarly conceives of Hamsun's condemnatory language as the "white man's fear of being displaced by the developments of modernity" (12). Although Jensen fell prey to some racist and fascist-friendly ideology, unlike Hamsun, he rightfully resisted Nazism due to various factors, the primary one being his admiration for the Jewish people (Nesby 82). However, if Jensen's opinion of the Spanish was unfair and misguided, his opinion of black Americans was even more unjust. In *Den Ny Verden*, in the chapter, "the Negro,"<sup>11</sup> Jensen unabashedly describes black Americans as gorillas on several occasions (29). A degrading comparison Jensen would **continue** to make in his book *Fra Fristaterne* many years later.

### ***The New World and Farming Culture: Contrasting Views on Industrial Modernity***

"I am a bit of an American, at least your heart desire's it so"<sup>12</sup>

The intellectual clash that occurred between Hamsun and Jensen, following the publication of Jensen's *The New World* with the article "Farming Culture," serves as a valuable example of the different opinions the two authors expressed around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the effects of industrialisation on farming. Jensen's thesis in *The New World*, emphasises the virtues of "farming culture" in Denmark and America in the same spirit as *The Gothic Renaissance*, interpreting it as the roots of modern America. Furthermore, Jensen expresses his hopes that the virtues of Scandinavian and American

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<sup>11</sup> Negren.

<sup>12</sup> Jeg er forsaavidt lidt af en Amerikaner, altsaa forsaavidt efter dit Hjærte (Hamsun 76).

farming culture will spread throughout the world, along with American democracy. For as Jensen asserts we live in “The greatest century of democracy and rejuvenation.”<sup>13</sup>

In “Farming Culture,” a direct response to Jensen’s chapter on Hamsun in *The New World*, Hamsun attempts to disparage Jensen’s assessment of Hamsun as a primitive Scandinavian peasant, who embodies what Jensen sees as the natural path from Scandinavian peasantry to industrialised modernity. In his response Hamsun adopts a sarcastic tone, characteristic of responsive articles of the time, aimed at creating a clear distinction between himself, as described by Jensen, a “commoner,” primitive man<sup>14</sup>, and Jensen the “intellectual” (176). Concurrently, Hamsun facetiously emphasises his alleged simple ways in highlighting his lack of understanding of Jensen’s convoluted thesis, scornfully alluding to the fact that it is otherwise “so wonderfully well written,<sup>15</sup> referring to the widely held belief that Jensen is the absolute master of Danish prose style. For Hamsun makes it clear on his “peasant brain”<sup>16</sup> that he is unable to conceive what Jensen means by “the soul’s inborn expanding force”<sup>17</sup> which, according to Jensen, facilitated Hamsun’s overcoming all obstacles and finishing “at the very height of his time.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Hamsun is determined to undermine Jensen’s thesis that the farmer has “created the modern human being”<sup>19</sup> (179), attacking Jensen’s assumption that culture and farming is inherently connected. Jensen describes Hamsun as a prime example of this theory, as a man of humble beginnings who managed to make it as an author. To emphasise his theory on Hamsun, Jensen develops an amusing creation myth to begin the chapter dedicated to Hamsun. He is described as a “Jætte,” a common term for a number of supernatural creatures from Nordic mythology, born out of a rock when a mountain had to be blown up to make way for a railway. In this way, Jensen humorously describes Hamsun’s inner disharmony between nature and modernity as a result of his birth, so often present in Hamsun’s fiction. For, as Jensen writes; “no one has played with the primitive,”<sup>20</sup> like Hamsun. However, Hamsun main interest in Jensen’s work, is his descriptions of farming culture. Appropriately, Hamsun explicitly uses his experience as a worker and farmer in America to deconstruct Jensen’s thesis, which theorises the superiority of the modern industrialised culture of America. When Jensen praises the virtues of modern farming found in America, Hamsun, objects by explaining it from a farmer’s point of view. Hamsun explains; “There does not exist in the whole world a more abusive method of farming”<sup>21</sup> than in America. Hamsun elaborates that the American farmer does not fertilise, water or rotate plots of land (81). This statement demonstrates Knut Hamsun’s understanding of farming, as it is these same bad agricultural practices that resulted in the wind erosion of the land in the American prairies around twenty years later. As a result, Hamsun clearly distinguishes industrial farming culture from subsistence-based farming culture in Scandinavia, which he clearly already interpreted as being more sustainable. Finally, Hamsun questions Jensen’s earlier beliefs in in the Jutish American connection expressed in *The Gothic Renaissance*:

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<sup>13</sup> “Demokratiets, Foryngelsens, største Aarhundrede! (254).

<sup>14</sup> urmennesket (176).

<sup>15</sup> saa vidunderlig skrevet (74).

<sup>16</sup> “bondehjerne (77).

<sup>17</sup> “sindets fødte udvidekraft (179).

<sup>18</sup> på Højden af sin tid (180).

<sup>19</sup> skabt det moderne menneske (179).

<sup>20</sup> “Ingen har som han funklet med det primitive” (179).

<sup>21</sup> “Der findes ikke i hele Verden et grovere Landbrug “(81).

Just as before in *The Gothic Renaissance*, since your book absolutely must reveal one deep and coherent basic thought. In the passages, the strings are stretched as tight as it can get. There must be made a connection between Leonardo, Darwin and Grundtvig, there must also be a connection between American Literature and “the Jutes,” something American must have come into it.<sup>22</sup>

While Jensen’s and Hamsun’s assessment of the industrialisation of America and Europe remain unique to their respective experiences, their opinions ultimately remain valuable in analysing the diverse opinions on the subject of America which were undoubtedly plentiful in Scandinavia at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as American industrialisation was slowly catching up with Europe. Jensen and Hamsun were not historians, and their descriptions of America were predominantly based on personal opinions and observations which naturally evolve over time. Nonetheless, Jensen’s views on America remained surprisingly consistent from *The Gothic Renaissance* until the publication of *Fra Fristaterne*. Knut Hamsun, by contrast, was aware of the many flaws of his first publication. For, by the time of the publication of “Farming Culture” in 1908 in *Tilskueren*, Hamsun writes that his “youthful sin” (89)<sup>23</sup> *The Cultural Life of Modern America*, was childish and badly written, expressing considerable embarrassment towards it. Accordingly, his views on America thus evolved from vehement opposition into compassion mixed with coexisting distrust of the country’s rapid unstoppable pace.

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<sup>22</sup> Ligesom før i *Den gotiske Renaissance*-, eftersom din Bog på Død og Liv skald aabenbare én dyb og sammenhængende Grundtanke. Ved Overgangene er da hver Snor strakt lige til Forstrakthed. Der skal være Forbindelse mellem Leonardo, Darwin og Grundtvig, der skal også være forbindelse mellem den Amerikanske Litteratur og “Jyderne.” Det synes iblandt at overstige menneskelige Ævner; der maa været kommet noget amerikansk ind i det” (85).

<sup>23</sup> ungdomssynd (89)

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