

The Civilization of the Renaissance – Jacob Burckhardt

CONSIDER: What most distinguishes the Italian Renaissance from the preceding Middle Ages according to Burckhardt; any support the primary documents might provide for this argument; how a proud medievalist might respond to this argument.

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognised himself as such. In the same way the Greek had once distinguished himself from the barbarian, and the Arabian had felt himself an individual at a time when other Asiatics knew themselves only as members of a race. . . .

In far earlier times we can here and there detect a development of free personality which in Northern Europe either did not occur at all, or could not display itself in the same manner. . . . But at the close of the thirteenth century Italy began to swarm with individuality; the charm laid upon human personality was dissolved; and a thousand figures meet us each in its own special shape and dress. Dante's great poem would have been impossible in any other country of Europe, if only for the reason that they all still lay under the spell of race. For Italy the august poet, through the wealth of individuality which he set forth, was the most national herald of his time. But this unfolding of the treasures of human nature in literature and art—this many-sided representation and criticism—will be discussed in separate chapters; here we have to deal only with the psychological fact itself. This fact appears in the most decisive and unmistakable form. The Italians of the fourteenth century knew little of false modesty or of hypocrisy in any shape; not one of them was afraid of singularity, of being and seeming unlike his neighbours.

The Myth of the Renaissance

Peter Burke

Many historians attacked Burckhardt's interpretation and the legacy built up around it. These historians argued that Burckhardt overemphasized how modern the Renaissance was. They stressed how much the Renaissance, even in Italy, was still part of the medieval world. Other historians have re-

sponded that criticisms of Burckhardt go too far. In the following selection Peter Burke criticizes Burckhardt's idea of the Renaissance as a myth and describes the main objections to it.

CONSIDER: Why, according to Burke, Burckhardt's idea of the Renaissance is a myth; how a supporter of Burckhardt might respond; whether the sources give greater support to Burckhardt's or Burke's interpretation.

Jacob Burckhardt defined the period in terms of two concepts, 'individualism' and 'modernity'. 'In the Middle Ages', according to Burckhardt, 'human consciousness . . . lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. . . . Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation—only through some general category.' In Renaissance Italy, however, 'this veil first melted into air . . . man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognised himself as such'. Renaissance meant modernity. The Italian was, Burckhardt wrote, 'the first-born among the sons of modern Europe'. The fourteenth-century poet Petrarch was 'one of the first truly modern men'. The great renewal of art and ideas began in Italy, and at a later stage the new attitudes and the new artistic forms spread to the rest of Europe.

This idea of the Renaissance is a myth. . . .

Burckhardt's mistake was to accept the scholars and artists of the period at their own valuation, to take this story of rebirth at its face value and to elaborate it into a book. To the old formulae of the restoration of the arts and the revival of classical antiquity, he added new ones such as individualism, realism, and modernity. . . .

This nineteenth-century myth of the Renaissance is still taken seriously by many people. Television companies and organisers of package tours still make money out of it. However, professional historians have become dissatisfied with this version of the Renaissance, even if they continue to find the period and the movement attractive. The point is that the grand edifice erected by Burckhardt and his contemporaries has not stood the test of time. More exactly, it has been undermined by the researches of the medievalists in particular. Their arguments depend on innumerable points of detail, but they are of two main kinds.

In the first place, there are arguments to the effect that so-called 'Renaissance men' were really rather medieval. They were more traditional in their behaviour, assumptions and ideals than we tend to think—and

also more traditional than they saw themselves. Hind-sight suggests that even Petrarch, 'one of the first truly modern men', according to Burckhardt, had many attitudes in common with the centuries he described as 'dark' . . .

In the second place, the medievalists have accumulated arguments to the effect that the Renaissance was not such a singular event as Burckhardt and his contemporaries once thought and that the term should really be used in the plural. There were various 'renascences' in the Middle Ages, notably in the twelfth century and in the age of Charlemagne. In both cases there was a combination of literary and artistic achievements with a revival of interest in classical learning, and in both cases contemporaries described their age as one of restoration, rebirth or 'renovation'.

Machiavelli and the Renaissance Federico Chabod

Reactions to and appreciations of Machiavelli's thought in *The Prince* form an apparently contradictory history in themselves. On the one hand, few thinkers in the history of political theory rank more highly than Machiavelli; he is recognized as being the first modern political theorist. On the other hand, there is a more popular tradition of rejecting his ideas as immoral; the term Machiavellian is pejorative, referring to political opportunism and ruthlessness. In the following selection Federico Chabod, an Italian historian who has written extensively on Machiavelli, analyzes Machiavelli and the significance of his ideas.

Question: Why Machiavelli's ideas are so appropriate to the historical realities of his time; how the selections from *The Prince* support this interpretation of Machiavelli.

The leitmotiv of Machiavelli's posthumous life was his great assertion as a thinker, representing his true and essential contribution to the history of human thought, namely, the clear recognition of the autonomy and the necessity of politics, 'which lies outside the realm of what is morally good or evil.' Machiavelli thereby rejected the medieval concept of 'unity' and became one of the pioneers of modern spirit. . . .

For Machiavelli accepted the political challenge in its entirety; he swept aside every criterion of action not suggested by the concept of *raison d'état*, i.e., by the exact evaluation of the historical moment and the construc-

tive forces which *The Prince* must employ in order to achieve his aim; and he held that the activities of rulers were limited only by their capacity and energy. Hence, he paved the way for absolute governments, which theoretically were completely untrammelled, both in their home and in their foreign policies.

If this was made possible by the Florentine Secretary's recognition of the autonomy of politics, it depended, conversely, on his own peculiar conception of the State, which he identified with the government, or rather with its personal Head. Accordingly, in *The Prince* all his attention was riveted on the human figure of the man who held the reins of government and so epitomized in his person the whole of public life. Such a conception, determined directly by the historical experience which Machiavelli possessed in such outstanding measure and presupposing a sustained effort on the part of the central government, was essential to the success and pre-eminence of his doctrine.

This was a turning-point in the history of the Christian world. The minds of political theorists were no longer trammelled by Catholic dogma. The structure of the State was not yet threatened in other directions by any revolt of the individual conscience. An entire moral world, if it was not eclipsed, had at any rate receded into the shadows, nor was any other at once forthcoming to take its place and to inspire a new fervour of religious belief; hence, political thought could express itself without being confused by considerations of a different character. It was an era in which unitarian States were being created amid the ruins of the social and political order of the Middle Ages, an era in which it was necessary to place all the weapons of resistance in the hands of those who had still to combat the forces of feudalism and particularism. It was, in short, an era in which it was essential that the freedom and grandeur of political action and the strength and authority of central government should be clearly affirmed. Only thus was it possible to obliterate once and for all the traces of the past and to offer to the society of the future, in the guise of a precept, the weapons which would preserve the life of the united nation in the face of disruptive elements old and new.

This was the great achievement of Niccolò Machiavelli, who accordingly became the legitimate representative of politics and government, the man who was at once admired and hated, followed and opposed, throughout two centuries of European history; and it was on him that the eyes of men were to be fixed, because only he, a poor, weary citizen of a city divided against itself, had proclaimed with an eloquence that was now muted the nature of the arms which the sovereign authority must employ in order to achieve victory.