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**BURCKHARDT'S HUMANIST MYOPIA:
MACHIAVELLI, GUICCIARDINI AND THE
WIDER WORLD¹**

Jacob Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) remains a fundamental text in the historiography of Renaissance Studies. It is not only a great piece of cultural history — indeed, the defining text — which has characterized the multidisciplinary manner in which the subject is addressed but it is also a kind of testament to the humanist mind, refined, of course, by intervening centuries and new ideas, but still a record of what Europeans continued to call high culture. This remarkable book has been the object of revisionist theory and critical assault. It has been shown to be anachronistic, selective, reductionist, driven by the currents of early and mid-nineteenth-century thought, such as Romanticism, Hegelianism, aestheticism, emerging sociological theory and so on. But the fact remains that it is still with us and that it has shaped the academic approach to the study of the Renaissance for 135 years.²

The purpose of this paper is to look at Burckhardt not as a disciple or a revisionist but in terms of some of his own assumptions about the relations between Italy and the wider

¹ A version of this paper was read at the World History Association meeting at Pratolino (Florence) in June 1995. I would like to thank Prof. John Headley of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Prof. Jerry Bentley of the University of Hawaii for their useful comments.

² For a general discussion of the historiography of the Renaissance before 1950 see W.K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation*. Cambridge MA: Houghton-Mifflin, 1948.

world in the Renaissance: to attempt to address his relegation of what some observers thought was the most important event since the incarnation³ to a short, almost insignificant passage in his chapter on the Discovery of the World and of Man: that is the European contact with the New World.

It is important to place this discussion in the context first of the period Burckhardt helped define and second in the context of Burckhardt's own century. The conclusion will be that these periods are mirrors, not of one another in their entirety but of one central strain which connected the Swiss historian and the humanist mind of Renaissance Italy. In particular, the humanist discovery of the individual self — at least as defined initially by Petrarch in the fourteenth century and his Florentine continuators — reached full development in Machiavelli, whose reflections on historical and political events reflect exactly his deep debt to the ancients and his belief in the individual self as the ultimate determining factor in events, regardless of their significance. In other words, the individual, self-conscious self is responsible for not only what happens but how those events are given meaning.

As an alternative, it is necessary to note Machiavelli's brilliant contemporary, fellow Florentine patrician and fellow historian, Francesco Guicciardini, in order to illustrate that not all late Florentine humanists were blinded by the brilliance of the ancient world and the restrictions of self-constructed personal experience.

An appropriate beginning would be two paragraphs from Book VI of Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Italy*, written between 1537 and 1540:

These voyages have made it clear that the ancients were deceived in many ways regarding a knowledge of the earth: that one could pass beyond the equinoctial line; that one could live in the torrid zone; as also, contrary to the opinion of the ancients, we have come to understand through the voyages of

³ López de Gomara wrote in his *General history of the Indies* that, "The greatest event since the creation of the world, excluding the Incarnation and the death of the Creator, is the discovery of the Indies, and so you call them the New World". Quoted in M. Lunenfeld, ed., *1492: Discovery, Invasion, Encounter* (Lexington MA: D.S. Heath, 1991, xxxvii.

others that one can dwell in those zones near the poles which the ancients affirmed were uninhabitable because of the immoderate cold resulting from the position of the heaven being so remote from the course of the sun. These voyages have also revealed what some of the ancients believed and others denied, namely that there are other inhabitants under our feet whom they called the Antipodes.

These voyages have not only confuted many things which had been affirmed by writers about terrestrial matters, but besides this, they have given some cause for alarm to interpreters of the Holy Scriptures, who are accustomed to interpret those verses of the psalms in which it is declared that the sound of their songs had gone over all the earth and their words spread to the edges of the world, as meaning that faith in Christ had spread over the entire earth through the mouths of the apostles: an interpretation contrary to the truth, because since no knowledge of these lands had hitherto been brought to light, nor have any signs or relics of our faith been found there, it is unworthy to be believed, either that faith in Christ had existed there before these times, or that so vast a part of the world had never before been discovered or found by men of our hemisphere.⁴

This passage from Guicciardini offers a remarkable insight into the consequences of the voyages of discovery on the part of a pragmatic — one might say cynical — politician, diplomat and historian of the late Florentine Renaissance. It is remarkable because of its clear recognition that neither the ancients nor Scripture held all knowledge. In fact, the second paragraph above was not restored to the text until the 1774 edition: no printed version between 1561 and 1774 contained the passage that reflects on those parts of the world that Christ forgot. Moreover, there is a wider context for these selections from Guicciardini. He comments insightfully on the effect which the Portuguese voyages around Africa had on the Venetian monopoly of the Spice Trade; and he remarks on the wealth the Spaniards were transferring from the New World to the Old, again implying the consequences for Italy.⁵ He

⁴ F. Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, tr. S. Alexander. (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 182.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 177 et sqq.

builds on the Noble Savage — or virtuous barbarian — tradition in his description of indigenous peoples in America, to the point that the route from Tacitus' *Germania* to Columbus' land-fall emerges, except that Guicciardini ends by comparing the New World natives to mild animals easily cheated, humiliated or enslaved by Europeans.⁶

This selection from Guicciardini, moreover, can be seen to mitigate the popular impression of those modern historians who argue that the voyages of discovery had in reality little effect upon the mental geography of Renaissance Europeans, since it was not terribly difficult to fit these new wonders into a world view described by Scripture and ancient wisdom.⁷ The prejudices of the European vision persisted, then, despite the fact that the new discoveries fact strained the well-secured baggage of the intellectual elite in profound ways. Guicciardini is definitely aware that something portentous has happened and is happening, and his analysis is sophisticated and germane, even in the context of his purpose, which is to explicate the history of Italy in his own times. One might accept this from the greatest historian since Tacitus and the greatest before Edward Gibbon.

This paper, however, is not an encomium of Guicciardini. Its purpose is rather to ask why Guicciardini added these observations to his *History*, while his contemporary, friend and fellow Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli did not. And, to suggest that over three centuries later Jacob Burckhardt, in his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* appears to follow the lead of Machiavelli, rather than pursue Guicciardini's and reinforce the recognition that the world had changed fundamentally after the discoveries of the later fifteenth and first half of the sixteenth centuries.

Machiavelli is not at all concerned with the New World. Silvia Ruffo-Fiore's massive annotated bibliography of all works by or on the great Florentine second chancellor records no evidence of any reflection on the events described by Guicciar-

⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁷ For example, Michael Ryan, John Elliott, Giuliano Gliozzi.

dini.⁸ Moreover, it is not just Machiavelli, of course. Erasmus, for example, is equally unconcerned, despite his wide correspondence and encyclopedic knowledge and curiosity. In the volumes of Erasmus's correspondence up to 1523,⁹ there is no mention of the *terra incognita*, even though his very close friend, Thomas More, had used it as the metaphorical island of *Utopia*, placing its discovery in the frame of verisimilitude of the real voyage of Amerigo Vespucci. Furthermore, this Vespucci was a Florentine patrician, whose first trip to Seville was not as a mariner but as the representative of Lorenzo de' Medici's interests. And, his four voyages — which were to make the New World his eponymous revelation — were printed in 1507 and widely read. And, Amerigo Vespucci equally remarks that the ancients did not know of this New World, and cultivated Florentine that he was, added that neither did Dante, or else it would have appeared in his *Commedia*. Machiavelli, then, had no excuse not to know or to appreciate the events of those years.

Also, in the best classical manner, Machiavelli defined himself as he was: a humanistically educated, sophisticated, well travelled Florentine gentleman. This is evident in those areas where he betrays himself most: his letters. Like the ancient Greeks, he saw himself as curious about other nations, other men and their experiences, and he reflected upon them. Thucydides set this model well in noting how Greeks differed from barbarians in their curiosity towards others.¹⁰ Machiavelli exhibits this curiosity perfectly. In his almost too famous letter to Francesco Vettori announcing the birth of *The Prince*, he writes: "I move on down the road to the inn, talk with passers-by, ask news of the places they come from, hear this and that, and note the various tastes and fancies of mankind".¹¹

⁸ S. Ruffo-Fiore, ed., *Niccolò Machiavelli: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism and Scholarship* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

⁹ See *The Collected Works of Erasmus: The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vols. 1-7 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974-87).

¹⁰ See A. Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 47.

¹¹ Quoted in J.R. Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 112.

He is, then, interested, and he seeks additional knowledge of the world. His diplomatic dispatches and his treatises are full of the most insightful, brilliant characterizations and political observations. He knows men and the world — but only the Old World, his world of Italian — really Flo-rentine — politics and its context, and only those men who conform to the classical image of human accomplishment established by Greek, Latin and Petrarchan humanist culture. Even when the New World has an impact on his beloved Florence, it does not appear. The wealth of the Spanish generated by their American mines is not a factor in the peninsular incursions which resulted in the Spanish hegemony. Other factors seem sufficient, despite the strength of those sinews of war.

Machiavelli's interest is human character, human causality. History is that shop-worn battle between an intemperate *Fortuna* and an inconsistent *virtù*, or resourcefulness. The events of history are driven, though, by individual, personal qualities and circumstances. Man has replaced God as the *primum mobile* of change.

Consider Francesco Guicciardini, however. His view of history is not that of men acting by opposing *fortuna* with *virtù* but of men driven by their individual self-interest, their *particolare*. There is, then, no model to apply, no evidence to be drawn, except to add to the data to be used to make decisions. In his *Ricordi*, Guicciardini directs a barb at his friend and compatriot Machiavelli by suggesting that it is useless to quote the Greeks and Romans in every incident.¹² Human causality is too complex for that and history does not repeat itself. Rather to Guicciardini history consists of the whole web of events which surround every decision. No one individual can know enough or be prudent enough to drive events. The web is too vast and too susceptible to manipulation by the various, mutually exclusive *particolari* of others. Regardless of how wise, educated, experienced, or prudent a man might be, his individual qualities are only one tiny factor in that web of circumstances. In this, of course, Guicciardini is writing an apologia for his own failure in his work for Pope Clement VII and his inability to control

¹² F. Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections of a Renaissance Statesman* [*Ricordi*], tr. M. Domandi (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 69 (no. 110).

young Cosimo de'Medici. But, it extends beyond that exculpation: it defines a theory of history based on appreciation of all possible factors in historical causality, not merely those driven by individual men and their deeds.

For Guicciardini, then, the discovery of the New World is just another fact, another element to be factored into the complex equation of historical change. All men are accepted for what they are, even if what they are should prove to be dramatically distant from the experience of Florentine humanists. There is no prejudice in favour of self over other in Guicciardini because his "self" is not a metaphor for a cultural collective unconscious stretching back to antiquity and rehabilitated in the centuries after Petrarch. He accepts what is as given and verifiable, even if it explodes the foundations of classical learning and revealed religion. It is not an accident that Francesco rejected his father's Platonism in favour of Aristotelianism and the law.

Machiavelli, though, is most concerned with individual character and with the ancients. His humanist perspective was driven by that same classical humanism first delineated and applied by Petrarch in the second half of the fourteenth century. Petrarch was obsessed with himself. He recovered the genre of autobiography — then as now a category of fiction — psychological motivation and the central role of classical literature in illuminating and defining the individual, autonomous self. Petrarch's interest in individual personality resulted in his rejection of the Aristotelian structures of medieval thought, to the point that he was not concerned with science or external discovery. He wrote in his little book *On His Own Ignorance and the Ignorance of Others*: "What is the use — I beseech you — of knowing the nature of quadrupeds, fowls, fishes, and serpents and not knowing or even neglecting man's nature, the purpose for which we are born and whence and whereto we travel?"¹³ It is human experience, informed by ancient literature, which gives us our selves.

There was also in Petrarch something not found in Machiavelli, indeed an element specifically rejected by the au-

¹³ F. Petrarch, "On His Own Ignorance", in E. Cassirer. P.O. Kristeller, J.H.Randall eds, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 58-9.

thor of the *Discourses* and *The Prince*: that is, a sincere, if often idiosyncratic, Christianity. Later, in that same text, Petrarch remarks that he is a true and genuine son of the faith, "a most ardent Christian"¹⁴. In this context he consequently notes that, "The voices of the Apostles were heard all over the earth, and their words spread unto the ends of the world"¹⁵. Here rests the other element of the Western tradition and mind: Christian Revelation, in the very form that by Guicciardini challenged in the quotation above.

These two factors, Christianity and classical learning defined the psychology of the Renaissance Italian mind which had been celebrated as individual and specific by Petrarch and the classical humanists. Or, in the words of Burckhardt, "man became a spiritual individual and recognized himself as such", and not "conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation"¹⁶. Such assumptions drove Burckhardt to investigate the civilization of the Renaissance largely in terms of these elements, to which he added the pre-occupations of his own time, that is, modernity (or progress) and a Romantic ideal of genius or *volksgeist*, which he attributes as specific to the Italian people in the fourteenth century and afterwards.

Burckhardt was born a Swiss Calvinist patrician of Basle in 1818, the same year as Karl Marx. He studied at Berlin and was a student of Ranke and was influenced both by the Romantic movement and Hegelism, both of which he was to reject. Like Goethe before him, two trips to Italy transformed him into a humanist, aesthetic observer, an historian of culture. Consequently, although trained as an historian, he became an extremely influential art historian, writing (then) definitive guides to Italian art (*Cicerone*, 1855, and his expansion of Kugler, 1847). Indeed, his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* was originally designed as a kind of prologue to a massive history of Italian art.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 79. See Guicciardini's comment above on this reference to the psalms.

¹⁶ J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, tr. S. Midlemore (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), I, 143.

Burckhardt's other works must be noted as well. Seven years before the printing of his *Civilization of the Renaissance* he had published *The Age of Constantine the Great*. This is a study of cultural decadence in the ancient world, the decline of the classical models Burckhardt so admired. After his death his huge four-volume *History of Greek Civilization* appeared (1898-1902). What is clear is Burckhardt's focus on the ancient world, on the essence of high European culture defined by a knowledge of Greece and Rome.¹⁷

This naturally becomes a central theme in his *Civilization*. Part III, "The Revival of Antiquity", occupies not only one fifth of the total text but also informs much of the rest of the study. The role of ancient learning and its reapplication in the Italian Renaissance is necessary, but, Burckhardt notes, not sufficient. The other elements noted above must be factored in as well, in particular "The Development of the Individual" (Part II) and his prevailing theme of the *volksgeist*, the Genius of the Italian people, a kind of Romantic racial theory which produced the firstborn of the sons of Europe. All of these elements must exist and in concentration for the explosion of culture and genius which he describes to occur. He writes: "We must insist upon it as one of the chief propositions of this book that it was not the revival of antiquity alone but its union with the genius (*volksgeist*) of the Italian people which achieved the conquest of the Western World".¹⁸

The conquest of the Western world: what exactly does he mean? He means the world which interested him, as it interested Machiavelli: the world of the cultivated, highly cultured, well furnished mind and imagination, fashioned in the image of antiquity and directed towards the responsibility to perfect your individual self, to turn your own subjective being into a work of art. The world, then, almost becomes a study of the individual genius which escapes this solipsism through the collective function of the *volksgeist*, the genius of a people. One cannot help but be reminded of Machiavelli's Chapter 26 of *The Prince* when the "Italia mia" (canzone 128) of Petrarch becomes a clarion call for the liberation of Italy from the barbarians: "The virtue boldly shall engage\And swiftly van-

¹⁷ See Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 179 sqq.

¹⁸ Burckhardt, *op. cit.*, 1, 175.

quish barbarous rage\Proving that ancient and heroic pride\In true Italian hearts has never died."¹⁹ Machiavelli knew and believed in his own *volksgeist* and connected it to the ancient world of Roman virtue.

What, then, Guicciardini, Machiavelli and Burckhardt to witness for the Renaissance and the wider world? Is there any connection between the experience of Guicciardini who saw and discussed the revolutionary impact of the voyages of discovery and Machiavelli who was so obsessed with Florentine politics and classical humanist definitions of culture and self that he could not imagine a world not dominated by those considerations? And to what degree was Jacob Burckhardt, writing three centuries after the printing of Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia*, influenced by his subject, to the degree that he accepts the pre-conceptions of the humanist mind as necessary conditions for the definition of his own scholarship? And, in turn, to what extent did Burckhardt's prejudices inform the writing of subsequent historians of the Renaissance to work within those boundaries of modernity, individualism, and antiquity?

To begin with Guicciardini: his historical method is the most "modern" inasmuch as he points the way to "scientific" history by requiring verifiable documentation before he makes judgements. He brought home to his family palace on the via Guicciardini many of the archives of the Florentine state in addition to the materials he had kept from years in the papal service. He saw all evidence as significant, if insufficient. He could escape from the strait jacket of classical humanist structures because he did not accept the premise that the ancients had known and discovered everything worth knowing. His experience taught him otherwise, as he instructed Machiavelli. Therefore, the news of the discovery of the New World and the contact with unknown peoples outside the Christian dispensation was part of his narrative of historical events. These were important moments because, in part, they reinforced his belief that experience mattered more than classical knowledge; and they reflected truths that in the future would have to be taken into account in any analysis of European circumstances. True

¹⁹ N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, tr. G. Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 138 (Virtù contro a furore/Prenderà l'arme, e fia el combatter corto;/Che l'antico valore/Nell'italici cor non è ancor morto.)

Aristotelian that he was, experience and demonstrable fact were of greater moment than all the theories of all mankind.²⁰

Machiavelli is profoundly different, however. He remains a prisoner of his experience and learning. He cannot escape from the twin humanist pillars of ancient learning and individual experience. Indeed, classical learning becomes the structure, the medium for his experience, just as the *Decades* of Titus Livius becomes the vehicle for his discussion of contemporary Florentine issues during the republic of Soderini. Machiavelli has chosen to interpret the world through the prism of the content, genre, form and essence of ancient culture. Here, he is a disciple of Petrarch who saw classical wisdom as the only sure model for understanding himself and his world, the subjective world of his own experience. For Petrarch and Machiavelli, these are not facts to be verified: they are moments to be savoured or events to be interpreted in light of their own immediate circumstances. The inner man has won over the outer world and Petrarch's *Secretum* becomes a text of discovery in itself, but the discovery of the interior world of the individual self.

Machiavelli's tradition, then, is powerfully dependent on the Florentine humanist vision of his universe. The earth is the earth of Pliny, Ptolemy and Strabo. He is concerned, like the later two, with the *ecumene*, defined as the world known to the ancients. To go beyond it is unnecessary. And, the discoveries of his own lifetime are at best curious, singular events, but of no interest to him because he cannot translate them into a vocabulary and frame of reference prepared by his humanist mind.

Although neither Machiavelli nor Guicciardini had anything other than a humane skeptic's opinion of the Christian religion, they could not escape it. It has been suggested that before the Scientific Revolution, atheism was inconceivable; the word, in English, after all, was only coined in the mid-sixteenth century. A world without God was like a

²⁰ For Guicciardini as historian, see M. Phillips, *Francesco Guicciardini: The Historian's Craft* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), and F. Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

world without gravity, intellectually, practically and psychologically impossible. Machiavelli's Florentine anticlericalism and Guicciardini's cynicism thus differentiate them from Petrarch and his honest but confused and self-seeking piety. Still, the Christian God was there acting through another sacred text, revealing an absolute truth both in itself and through authors who were steeped in classical learning, like St Augustine. It would be incorrect and perilous to simply ignore Christianity as a cultural influence in Machiavelli and Guicciardini, as even the latter was driven to observe that there were people whom God forgot and this was significant.

However, it is with Burckhardt that these elements reach fruition. Machiavelli lacked both the interest and the mental equipment to confront the New World being revealed in his own lifetime. But, Burckhardt had no such limitation: he was a well educated European who did not die until the penultimate year of the last century. To him the New World was known, inhabited and sufficiently powerful to have become in the United States of America the third power in the world after Great Britain and Germany in many areas of economic interest. But, he nevertheless relegates its discovery to a few paragraphs in the chapter on "The Discovery of the World and of Man", which begins with the Crusades, progresses through Marco Polo and reaches Columbus in two paragraphs. Most of the chapter deals with literature.

Those first paragraphs, though, which are subtitled "Journeys of the Italians", begin as does so much of Burckhardt's analyses with a return to his book's guiding principles. It merits quotation: "Freed from the countless bonds which elsewhere in Europe checked progress, having reached a high degree of individual development and been schooled by the teachings of antiquity, the Italian mind now turned to the discovery of the outward universe, and to the representation of it in speech and form".²¹ What we have, then, is not just a rehearsal of the great Burckhardtian themes of modernity, individualism and ancient learning but a statement that these things drove the Italians, like Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, among others, to sail west. The forces that could save Italy from the barbarians in Machiavelli impelled the Italians across the seas. No desire

²¹ Burckhardt, II, 279.

for spices here, no attempts to obviate the middlemen of the Mediterranean, no wish to convert the unbaptised, as Gucciardini had suggested. Rather, simple, ancient learning and its fruits: individualism and progress.

Burckhardt's myopia, then, was an affliction carried within the DNA of the cultivated European mind. It was a position founded on the primacy of classical studies as the discipline required for all endeavours. It was a caste mark of the well born and well educated and it was the model for behaviour, understanding and wisdom. There is no real need to confront the realities of a world unknown to Scripture or antiquity. The European world will always be sufficient and self-contained, despite what might happen elsewhere. The conquest of Europe by the Italians in their humanism and manners could easily have been extended by Burckhardt to include the New World as well. The new nations of the new continents were irrelevant because they did not contribute to those fundamental elements seen as the essence of humanity: European classical studies and individualism. This is the heroic individual or, if you prefer the other Burckhardtian tag, unbridled egoism, of Machiavelli's *Prince* transferred to the patrician scholar of Basle. Burckhardt determined how scholars respond to the Renaissance and to a degree how they still study it. What he did not do, however, was to address his own presumptions to understand better that his short-sightedness was conditioned by the very period he studied. He could not escape the humanist, Christian mentality of his subject, despite what he knew, because, like Machiavelli in his time, he simply did not care. It did not matter. It was not to be found in ancient texts or Christian revelation, despite the German humanist, Willibald Pirckheimer's, contention that the ancients had known of the New World, which he proved by collecting and printing dozens and dozens of ambiguous selections from classical authors which might, if laboured, indicate that something wonderful rested on the far side of the Ocean Sea.

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