Jacob Burckhardt as a Theorist of Modernity: Reading The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy

Author(s): Roberta Garner
Source: *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 48-57
Published by: American Sociological Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/202194
Accessed: 26/01/2009 07:12

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=asa.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

American Sociological Association and *American Sociological Association* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Sociological Theory*.

http://www.jstor.org

JACOB BURCKHARDT AS A THEORIST OF MODERNITY: READING *THE CIVILIZATION OF THE RENAISSANCE IN ITALY**

ROBERTA GARNER
De Paul University, Chicago

Jacob Burckhardt's The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy is "read" as a nineteenth century conceptualization of modernity. Its method is one of induction from a dense mass of details drawn from the literature, historiography, and art of the Renaissance. In some respects, Burckhardt anticipates Weber and parallels Marx, but he also includes certain elements of modernity that are absent from the other theorists, such as the emergence of modernity from the interstices of the political order, the formation of the totalitarian state, the cult of celebrity, and the tendency toward crime. He is particularly concerned with Renaissance society as a transitional form of society, and thus implicitly, with the nature of transitions.

INTRODUCTION

The central theme of nineteenth century sociology was the search for the definition and the causes of modernity, a search that was shared with philosophers, historians, and economists. The apparent triumph of the European civilization—Western, bourgeois, and enlightened—clamored for an explanation. Although set apart from the sociologists by profession and method, the German-Swiss historian and art-historian Jacob Burckhardt addressed the same issues and provides us with a vivid interpretation of the process by which modern culture emerged.

A brief biographical note suffices. Jacob Burckhardt was born in 1818 (the same year as Marx) in Switzerland into the family of a Protestant clergyman that enjoyed an inheritance of wealth and power from the silk trade. He studied at Berlin and Bonn. His own intellectual life may be said to parallel the Renaissance itself. After three years of theological studies he underwent a crisis of faith; after a concentration in the history of the middle ages, travels to the "beautiful lazy South" ("in den schönen faulen Süden," German xxiii) drew his attention away from the severe and pious Northern European middle ages to the history and art history of the Renaissance in Italy. By the late 1840s and the 1850s he was writing on the emergence of the Renaissance, beginning with the conception of human destiny in Dante. By the late 1850s, the outline of his *magnum opus* was underway; *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* was published in 1860 and widely acclaimed. Burckhardt remained a professor in Basel (generally described as a rather undistinguished university) and continued to publish primarily in the field of Renaissance art history. As part of his appointment there, he was constrained to teach courses at his high school as well for a number of years; his university courses were generally not well attended. He died in 1897. His biography appears to be free of the turmoil that marked the lives of several of the great social theorists of modernity. Absent is the outward political struggle that was central to Marx' life; he shifted gradually from the romantic and liberal ideas of 1848 to a more conservative —perhaps more accurately, apolitical— stance. He remained unmarried, but in his personal life there is no evidence of the inner despair and depression that haunted Weber. Unlike Weber and Durkheim, he did not live to see the "Great War" and thus was spared the sight of the triumphant European bourgeoisie beginning its self-destruction. His interpretation of the Renaissance and of modernity itself thus gives the impression of coinciding with his life course, both having a trajectory of a break with order and religious faith,

* The author thanks DePaul University for supporting her leave of absence in Florence, Glovenia Gilton for clerical assistance, and Marshall Berman for dialogue on the concept of the modern.

followed by a new synthesis that includes openness, progress and enlightenment. Yet, as we shall see, Burckhardt does not shy away from certain contradictory and painful aspects of modernity.

Burckhardt's method sets him sharply apart from the social theorists. Comte, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim strive for an abstract analysis of the emergence of modern society, nevertheless recognizing that such an analysis is inevitably limited by the historical—i.e., time-bound and unique—nature of the phenomena themselves. In Comte we see a crudely abstract schema of successive epochs. For Marx there is a more subtle recognition of the interplay between an abstract method of analysis (to put it in abbreviated form, historical materialism) and the specific particulars of each social formation, mode of production and even nation-state. The over-all "laws of motion" of human history are manifested in the more confined trajectories of each mode of production/social formation. For Weber, there is a constant tension between nomothetic generalization and ideographic data. Durkheim is caught in the same conflict, addressing—but not resolving—it as he vacillates between the historical schemes of *The Division of Labor*, the abstract rules of the sociological method, the positivism of data collection, and the empirical and historically-grounded particulars of *Suicide*. Simmel toys with both a nomothetic view of human interaction—timeless, "atomistic," and almost mathematical—and a method of observing social reality that is firmly grounded in turn-of-the-century central Europe. Burckhardt seems blissfully oblivious to these dilemmas of the social scientists; his method is historical, i.e., he accepts the uniqueness of the events and their time-bound and linear nature. There is no search for scientific laws that govern human society in general or the transition from one type of society to another. He is thoroughly immersed in the specificity of the Renaissance.

He also ignores the two great methodological inventions of the nineteenth century social scientist: positivism (the collection of "data," i.e., the construction of precise, empirically-grounded observations); and the method of ideal types (i.e., the construction of defining concepts that identify essential features of a phenomenon). His wealth of details about the Renaissance is not generated by a self-consciously scientific procedure, but simply obtained by the intelligent reading and observation that a classical education made possible. The data are often anecdotal and always presented in a casual and *ad hoc* way. As a theoretician he works inductively, discovering modernity in his mass of details, rather than inventing it a priori in an ideal-typical conceptualization. In the final analysis, this method is a bit disingenuous; the reader realizes that Burckhardt of course has quite a systematic notion of what modernity is, and far from just "discovering" it in his mass of details, he has really already "invented" it.

Yet despite these apparently inductive, ideographic, and casual methods, Burckhardt offers the twentieth century reader a number of insights about modernity and the emergence of modernity that startle us with their freshness.

Instead of proceeding according to the flow of the work itself, I will treat Burckhardt's ideas in two sections—first, the major elements of modernity, and second, the nature of the transition to modernity. The reader should be aware that this exposition is an abstraction from Burckhardt that is not true to his own *modus operandi*. Nor is the distinction between modernity and the transition to modernity so neat; the essence of modernity is that it appears to be always in transition ("all that is solid melts into air") and thus the characteristics of transitions are often one and the same as characteristics of the modernity.

THE NATURE OF MODERNITY

Undoubtedly the best known contribution of Burckhardt is his characterization of the Renaissance as the period of *the discovery of the individual*. For Burckhardt, the discovery of the human being (die Entdeckung des Menschen), the awakening of the self (das Erwachen der Persönlichkeit), and the development of the individual (die

Entwicklung des Individuums) are key features of the Renaissance that mark it as the first modern epoch. This momentuous step towards a modern form of consciousness has many facets.

One is the recognition of the individual apart from membership in primordial and/or hierarchical collectivities ("race, people, party, family, or corporation," English edition, p. 143). The individual sees himself as such and defines a self-interest that is distinct from that of the collectivities to which he continues to belong.

A second element of this new consciousness is the perfecting of the individual (die Vollendung der Persönlichkeit). Here Burckhardt uses a word that is distinct from "individual" or "individuality" and that comes closer to the English concept of the self. "Persönlichkeit" in German carries connotations of both intimacy and public recognition; it is a less socially isolated concept than "the individual." It includes not only the intimate and psychological sense of "the personality" but also the sense of the "outstanding" and even comes close to the idea of celebrity or genius. Thus the Renaissance becomes the first era of "self-improvement," ushering in the desire for well-rounded achievements, for excellence in physical, mental, and artistic spheres. Burckhardt stresses that these achievements go beyond dilettantism. In any case, these impulses are associated with the concept of an individual who is distinct from a collectivity. The individual himself (or herself) must develop all facets to the self, rather than remaining content with a specialization within a medieval organic community.

A third instance of the emergence of the individual is the discovery of man (der Mensch), the growth of a self-awareness and self-consciousness. Human beings become the objects of self-study. Thus self-reflection, the taking of the self as an object of study, becomes a hallmark of the modern age. Burckhardt points to the manifestations of this in literature and the arts. Careful descriptions of the outward appearance of individuals and of their inner character became popular. Biography broke away from the rigid formulas of hagiography and focused on secular subjects and on their idiosyncratic, colorful, and even vicious or repellent characteristics. The epitome of this awakening of self-analysis is the writing of autobiographies. These too became increasingly frank and self-revealing. That some of these revelations were in fact lies does not detract from their self-scrutinizing quality (English, p. 330). Writing of Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography, Burckhardt comments: "He is a man who can do all and dares do all, and who carries his measure in himself. Whether we like him or not, he lives, such as he was, as a significant type of modern spirit" (English, p. 330).

Finally, a fourth element of modern individualism that emerged in the Renaissance is the "cult of celebrity" or, as Burckhardt terms it, "der moderne Ruhm" (the modern idea of fame). Closely related to the striving for fame is the awakening of the desire for novelty; the celebrity offers new sensations, creates new works of art, and exemplifies innovation (English, p. 151). The striving for fame gives rise to new social phenomena. One is the cult of the birthplace (or death sites) of famous men, of which Burckhardt gives many instances. As in the case of biography, these cults had their origins in the preservation of saints' relics, but like biography, they broke away from their confined religious origins.

Finally, Burckhardt draws our attention to the *reductio ad absurdum* of the search for fame, the crime committed in order to imprint one's name and memory on the public (English, p. 162).

The idea that the awakening of the individual is an essential feature of modernity was, of course, widely held in the nineteenth century. What is interesting about Burckhardt is the way in which he discovers the precise moment of the emergence of these attitudes and values. The twentieth century reader is also impressed at the way in which Burckhardt anticipates certain phenomena of our own times—the cult of celebrity, the confessional autobiography, and the crimes of publicity seekers.

Burckhardt's identification of modernity with individualism is different in a number of respects from Weber and Durkheim's. The latter look more toward the Protestant

Reformation as the first manifestation of modern individualism and thus they tend to emphasize the inward, spiritual, and even self-isolating aspects of individualism: the calling of the individual; the tendency toward "egoism," the loneliness or loss of social bonds experienced by the individual; the separation of the individual from a distant God. Burckhardt, finding the point of emergence in nominally-Catholic Italy, stresses a different (though overlapping) conceptualization of individualism: self-interest, self-discovery, self-fulfillment, and the search for fame and recognition. In the contemporary United States, where many of the sharp distinctions between Catholic and Protestant cultures have blurred, these earlier Catholic (or generally Mediterranean) forms of individualism have blended with the more introverted Protestant ones. The ebbing away of the Puritan Ethic in the United States in recent decades has not brought about an end to individualism, but rather a rediscovery of the forms first found in the Renaissance with its emphasis on self-discovery, self-fulfillment, and the display of the self.

The second cluster of attributes of modernity that Burckhardt discovers in the Renaissance is the construction of the state ("The State as a Work of Art" or "Der Staat als Kunstwerk"). Burckhardt is interested in the emergent forms of the state but also in the associated forms of consciousness, i.e., a new consciousness that permits the deliberate construction of institutions rather than their acceptance as "given" by God or custom.

His analysis of the state in the Renaissance centers on the conclusion that in the Renaissance, the customary forms of political life (patrimonial, patriarchal, traditional and "natural") receded and were replaced by consciously created institutions. This central process was closely connected to the problem of legitimacy. Once tradition ceased to be the foundation of the political order, political institutions had no inherent legitimacy. Burckhardt traces several solutions to this problem. One was the invention—and repeated reformulation—of constitutions, so characteristic of the Italian republics. Another solution was the dominance of a single individual, by virtue not of charisma, but cunning and force. Another solution was the establishment of a precursor of the totalitarian state, in which power is used to eliminate potential opposition. All of these solutions created political orders that "are the outcome of reflection and calculation." He thus locates the origins of the "spirit of rational calculation" so central to modern life in the political as much as in the economic sphere.

Finally, and of great importance, Burckhardt recognizes that the problem of legitimacy may well remain unsolved. Once the "traditional" and "natural" forms of political order disappeared, legitimacy could never be fully reestablished. The problem of the Renaissance (and by extension, of all modern civilization) is the absence of a solid base of legitimacy. Once political life becomes the subject of questioning, self-conscious inquiry, deliberate institution-building, and self-interest, legitimacy can never again be firmly reconstituted. Burckhardt here poses an issue that ultimately confounds Weber: The claims of both charisma and rational-legal authority (the two post-traditional forms of authority) can never be permanent or unquestioned, and both are inherently unstable. Weber recognized the instability of charismatic authority, but unlike Burckhardt failed to see that within a system of rational-legal values what is "rational" and "legal" itself becomes an object of questioning and of social conflict. A bureaucracy or other rational-legal structure has only an appearance of rationality; the actors in the social system can challenge it, as they do indeed in modern societies. Instability, but also renewal and "progress" become inherent features of modern structures of authority.

Let us return for a moment to the forms of the political institutions of the Renaissance. On the one hand, there were the republics, the city states of the center and north of Italy. These were in fact, for the most part, oligarchies and were often caught up in bitter internal class struggles. As a result of their precarious inner and external security, the ruling classes sought constantly to revise the basis of their authority.

> In many of their chief merits the Florentines are the pattern and earliest type of Italians and *modern Europeans generally* [my emphasis]; they are so also in many of their defects. When Dante compares the city which was always mending the constitution with the sick man who is continually changing his posture to escape from pain, he touches with the comparison a permanent feature of the political life of Florence. The great modern fallacy that a constitution can be made, can be manufactured by a combination of existing forces and tendencies, was constantly cropping up in stormy times; even Machiavelli is not wholly free from it (English, pp. 103-104).

The second form of state was composed of the tyrannies and despotisms. Most of these were rather ephemeral, small in scale and held together by the cunning of the individual tyrant. Burckhardt makes no concessions to a Weberian concept of charisma, with its mystical and religious connotations; individual power is based on shrewdness, a loyal police force, well-targeted generosity, family loyalties, and so on—the rationally calculated list of survival mechanisms that Machiavelli outlined in *The Prince*.

Of particular interest to Burckhardt is one of the earliest of these despotic states, the kingdom of Frederick II in southern Italy and Sicily in the thirteenth century. Far from being a traditional state based on the customary rule of the imperial house of Hohenstaufen, this kingdom was a thoroughly calculated "work of art," and as such, a forerunner of the absolutist state. Frederick II, far from being a traditional ruler, had a "thoroughly objective treatment of affairs" (English, p. 24). "Frederick's measures (especially after 1231) are aimed at the complete destruction of the feudal state, at the transformation of the people into a multitude destitute of will and of the means of resistence, but profitable to the utmost degree to the exchequer . . ." (English, p. 24). Frederick's rational and deliberate calculation is apparent in his copying methods of taxation from the Saracen states and in his creation of a police force staffed by Saracens.

In his discussion of the construction of the Renaissance state, Burckhardt thus confronts the reader with a central contradiction of modernity: Human beings have an ever greater ability to create their own institutions and yet are subject to ever greater unfreedom, passivity, oppression, "massification," and disorder. Heightened self-consciousness about the social order, the breaking of the bonds of custom, the possibility of the rational creation of new institutions have as yet not found fulfillment in a just and democratic social order. In place of new institutions intelligently formed with a general public participation and consensus, there is the threat of either despotism or chaos. On the one hand, rational calculation and objective analysis all too easily slide into what later writers were to term totalitarianism. On the other hand, the end of traditional unquestioned authority had produced instability and a crisis of legitimacy and governability. Burckhardt here presents a broader and more profound critique of the modern state than does Weber; bureaucratization is only one element of the possible outcomes of the modern state as a deliberately constructed work of art. He anticipates more clearly the physically repressive (and not merely bureaucratic) activities of the modern state, devoting much attention to the formation and operation of police forces. Yet unlike Weber, he is sensitive to the ambiguous and dialectical nature of this political modernity; at its core it still holds out a promise of a democratic and enlightened political order, so that there is for Burckhardt no inevitable and irreversible mutation into a bureaucratic and/or physically repressive Leviathan. Here he seems close to Marx, who acknowledged the unfulfilled promises contained in the "rational kernel" of capitalism. But where Marx explores this contradiction between the potential and the actual in the economic sphere, with the concept of the social relations of production as "fetters," Burckhardt locates the contradiction in the political realm and lacks the concept of class to visualize how it might be overcome.

The third major characteristic of modernity that Burckhardt found in the Renaissance is the disappearance of estates or status groups ("Stände" in German, unfortunately mistranslated as "Classes" in the English edition). "Birth and origin"

lost much of their importance as the dimensions of inequality, not because society was equalized but because it became more open. The transformation of a caste-like society of estates into a class society at the end of the middle ages was, of course, a well-understood phenomenon by Burckhardt's day. The originality of his observations lies not so much in pointing it out as in showing how the Renaissance's conception of the process differed from the actual state of affairs, how its ideology parted ways with its social structural reality. The Renaissance created two great ideals about class structure. One was that it was only personal excellence—the achievements of the outstanding individual—that counted, now that birth and origin were no longer of importance. Burckhardt recounts this belief (so familiar to us as a guiding myth of our own social order), but is not taken in by it. The second ideal, apparently completely contradictory to the first, was the passion for chivalry and knighthood, the inability to free oneself from a nostalgic reinvention of medieval forms of comportment.

In short, Burckhardt shows how in an age in which economic class became the paramount basis of inequality, forms of consciousness were as yet "mismatched" to the new social structure. In fact, this "incorrect" consciousness could even in the short run—but only in the short run—determine social being, as in the cases in which wealthy burghers tried to turn themselves into a landed aristocracy. The purchase (or invention) of titles of nobility, the purchase of land, and the delightful invention of the villa (passed on to our own day as "the second home" and the resort condo) are the results of this peculiarly nostalgic consciousness, so clearly exemplified in the tastes of the Medici family.

To close the section on Burckhardt's concept of modernity, one can point out that the overarching themes are *self-reflection and deliberate construction of social institutions*. The state is an attempted work of art; the individual is a discovery; the "self-made man" scrambles up to wealth, fame and power; social institutions become the result of rational calculation. Nowhere is this essential feature of modernity better captured than in Burckhardt's discussion of wit and satire (Der Moderne Spott und Witz). For wit, satire, and irony are the necessary associates of self-reflection and rational construction of human institutions, since they suggest a distancing and a withdrawal of faith from an institution or person. Skepticism replaces the sacred character of persons and institutions; wit and satire are connected to the loss of legitimacy of "traditional" or "natural" institutions. Delegitimation no longer occurs only in ritualized observances (e.g., Carnival) but becomes more pervasive, more permanent, and more connected to the written word. As long as institutions are believed to be "natural" or part of a divine order, they are not inherently funny; reverence and perhaps despair are the appropriate stance toward the natural order, while a humanly-designed system excites laughter. (Perhaps this is why there are many jokes about socialism, but few about capitalism, which appears to follow impersonal laws of supply and demand.)

CHARACTERISTICS OF TRANSITIONS

Burckhardt is fascinated by the nature of the transition to modernity. Far from presenting a static "snapshot" of the Renaissance or a simple contrast of it with the middle ages, he tries to grasp it as a transitional form of society. In doing so, he introduces several important concepts for understanding the process of transition; the concepts are implicit in his treatment of the material rather than spelled out as a theory of social change or as nomothetic laws. It is clear, however, that his conceptualization of change was influenced by Hegel and bears the stamp of the dialectic.

In general terms, his conception of change centers on the idea of a forward motion in history that is not however a simple cumulative advance. Progress takes place through a process of negation. For example, modernity did not emerge directly from the successful institutions of the middle ages by a process of gradual evolution; on the contrary, it emerged from institutional interstices, from institutional gaps and the failures of the social order.

Change generally takes place as institutions collapse and it is usually accompanied by disorder and violence.

Observing any single institution or behavior it is often difficult to judge whether or not it is "progressive;" only by observing it in its context and judging it by its historical consequences can one make this evaluation. Change generally takes place not only in qualitative leaps (rather than quantitative accumulation); it occurs through an even more dialectical process in which institutions are simultaneously destroyed and preserved, as a previously existing institution is re-contextualized into a new social order, serving new functions within the new totality (Hegelian *Aufhebung*).

In keeping with themes in Hegelian thought, Burckhardt believes that human beings in the past have failed to understand their own epoch, even when they are as self-conscious and reflective as the people of the Renaissance; they often delude themselves that they are reviving a distant past when in fact they are constructing a future. We can readily see that Burckhardt shares these dialectical premises with Marx.

Let us examine in more detail his view of the special features of Renaissance society as a transitional form of society. In the logic of his work, the concept of interstices and political space comes first. For Burckhardt, the Renaissance became possible because the conflict between the Emperor and the Pope opened up a political (and also cultural) space for a new order in Italy. "The struggle between the Popes and the Hohenstaufen left Italy in a political condition which differed essentially from that of other countries of the West" (p. 21). "Between the two lay a multitude of political units—republics and despots—in part of long standing, in part of recent origin, whose existence was founded simply on their power to maintain it" (p. 22).

It is precisely the failure of the medieval institutions that made possible the emergence of modern ones. The Renaissance institutions arose because there was a power vacuum between the Pope and Emperor *and* because the struggle between the two forces diminished the legitimacy of each, ultimately breaking down the legitimacy of the totality of medieval institutions.

It needs to be noted here that Burckhardt gives primacy to the political (not the economic or the cultural) as the opening wedge of social change; but he makes no claims that it is a universal law or principle that political change causes or precedes other changes. Burckhardt also differs from Marx in giving no attention to class struggle, a revolutionary movement or a revolutionary consciousness in this process. For Burckhardt, human beings build institutions out of necessity; when old ones fail them, they perforce must make new ones. Consciousness follows these initially desperate efforts to create a new order.

Once he establishes this initial "cause" of the Renaissance in the conflicts and failures of medieval political institutions, Burckhardt becomes fascinated by the non-linear, dialectical and "spiral" progress of the Renaissance. Several instances will give the reader the flavor of his thought on how archaic features not only persist during a process of change, but may actually come to the forefront, at least temporarily, and there acquire a new meaning.

One of these examples is that of the belief in astrology, taken up in Part VI, Chapter IV, "The Mixture of Ancient and Modern Superstitions." Burckhardt is puzzled by the Renaissance obsession with astrology. As an enlightened intellectual of the nineteenth century, he is offended by this superstition and seeks to give it some meaning in its historical context. It was a way of accounting for the fate of individuals at a time when many possibilities and potentials became open. In the closed hierarchical world of the middle ages, the individual human destiny was not a puzzle to be solved. In the open and self-constructed world of the Renaissance, fate seemed arbitrary. In order to bring a intellectual coherence into this apparently random play of Fortune, the Renaissance turned to astrology. (Only an intellectual of the stature of Machiavelli could resist the appeal of astrology, and accept random Fortuna as the force that counterbalances Virtú.)

Astrology has a role in Burckhardt's conceptualization of modernity that is similar to Weber's predestinarian Calvinism and Marx' commodity fetishism. All three theorists are pointing to mystified

ways of drawing back from the edge of human freedom. Faced for the first time in human history with the economic and political potential for consciously constructing institutions (the transition from prehistory to history, as Marx termed it), human beings initially turn back into a mystified determinism. In Weber's analysis, this withdrawal is religious and Protestant, and actually unintentionally contributes to the progress of capitalism. In Burckhardt and Marx, the mystification takes a pseudo-scientific form (astrology, commodity fetishism); as such it impedes rather than contributes to intellectual progress. Marx and Burckhardt here again converge in the idea that human beings constantly "misread" the realities of social structure, in this instance, obscuring a scientific understanding of the partially determined nature of institutions by a pseudo-scientific and mystified ideology of determinism. Of course, Burckhardt is observing an early form of modern pseudo-scientific mystification, whereas Marx identifies it in the economic doctrines of his own contemporaries.

Thus the apparently archaic belief in astrology, far from being a vestige of the past (like the folk superstitions with which he contrasts it), was one of the paradoxical symptoms of emerging modernity.

A similarly paradoxical and pseudo-archaic feature of the Renaissance is the tendency of social institutions to collapse into "familism," into a reliance on relatives as guards, armed retainers, accountants, advisors, supporters, etc. Although undoubtedly family ties were strong in the middle ages, the familism of the Renaissance was not simply a vestige of the past; on the contrary, it was a new and transitional form, a symptom of the dissolution and collapse of old social institutions and primordial ties and the inability of new ones to be born. As religious and feudal hierarchies lost their hold (and in any case, their hold was never strong in Italy), the vacuum of collective ties was first filled by reliance on the extended family. The problems of illegitimacy and disorder were resolved (if not solved) by family ties.

Some readers may feel that Burchkardt presents a more down-to-earth picture of the nature of social transformations than Marx; for Burckhardt, humanity cannot count on a *Klasse für sich* to initiate the building of a new social order. One might say that Burckhardt identified a problem that Marx recognized but did not resolve: What mechanism allows a new social order to emerge from the collapse of an old order without a prolonged "interregnum" of amoral familism? It was only with Lenin's concept of the vanguard party that Marxist analysis found a realistic "bridging institution" that could prevent a collapse into familism as old institutions disintegrated or were destroyed.

Still in the context of familism as a characteristic of transitions, the reader might wish to note how the Mafia has adapted family and pseudo-family structures in order to control the transition to modernity in southern Italy and within immigrant communities in the United States; far from being "a vestige of traditional times," the Mafia (and similar types of organized crime) is modern and adaptable.

Familism as the most straightforward line of defense against the upheaval of social change is closely related to another transitional phenomenon, crime (das Verbrechen). Burckhardt towers over his pseudo-scientific contemporaries in recognizing that crime is not a phenomenon of individual pathology but an integral element of certain types of social structure. In some respects, he thus anticipates Durkheim, but at many points his analysis seems more profound and disturbing. Crime is not merely a pathology that provides clues about the normal functioning of a society; for Burckhardt, crime *is* the normal functioning of society in eras of transition. With the breakdown of legitimacy and the loss of medieval notions of justice, crime becomes a part of the social order. "Each individual, even among the lowest of people, felt himself inwardly emancipated from the control of the state and its police, whose title to respect was illegitimate and founded on violence" (p. 437).

Burckhardt also links crime to "excessive individualism" (p. 442). He remarks: "The fundamental vice of this character [the character revealed in the study of the life of the upper classes in Renaissance Italy] was

at the same time a condition of its greatness—namely excessive individualism. The individual first inwardly casts off the authority of a state, which, as a fact, is in most cases tyrannical and illegitimate, and what he thinks and does is, rightly or wrongly, now called treason. The sight of victorious egoism in others drives him to defend his own right by his own arm" (p. 442).

Burckhardt recognizes that the same phenomenon also appears in the sphere of personal relationships, commenting: "His love, too, turns mostly for satisfaction to another individuality equally developed—namely to his neighbour's wife" (p. 442). Thus adultery, as well as violent crime, treason, and crimes against property are all inherent in the transition to modernity. They grow out of the collapse of traditional institutions, the end of feudal and patriarchal authority, the weakening of collective ties (apart from some family loyalties) characteristic of the middle ages, the loss of institutional legitimacy, and the adoption of "self-interest" as a moral measure.

Burckhardt of course realizes that the Renaissance is not merely a transition to modernity; modernity itself is a condition of constant transition, and for that reason, crime is potentially a central characteristic of all modern societies. It is not a social ill to be "cured" by social work, but the inherent underside of a social order based on self-interest, individualism, weak collective ties, and conflict over what constitutes the legitimate authority of the state. Nor is crime a result of poverty; in one form or another it is diffused through all classes of society, and Burckhardt finds it especially prevalent in the upper classes of Renaissance Italy. In so far as it is a class phenomenon at all, it is not the result of "poverty" (the prevailing condition in the middle ages) but of the modern gap between a limitless vision of individual wealth and success and a social structure of limited opportunities. Burckhardt appears to be close to Durkheim's idea that crime is a "cost" of individualism, just like suicide. But in some respects, Burckhardt seems even more prepared than Durkheim to accept the painful possibility that we cannot draw a simple line between "individualism" and "excessive individualism." Crime is not merely a cost of individualism, but an inherent element of modern life, inextricably tied to the negation of the limited, rigid and consensual medieval order.

These radical reflections have led some writers to associate Burckhardt with the existentialists. He appears to describe a human being who has been stripped of his collective loyalties, left isolated and free. Such a person has nothing left but a sense of honor, not a collectively-conditioned medieval sense of honor, but a more self-determined and situational criterion of action. He refers to that "enigmatic mixture of conscience and egoism which often survives in modern man after he has lost, whether by his own fault or not, faith, hope, and love" (p. 428). [Faith, hope and love are the three Christian virtues that were the highest human values in medieval thought.] But Burckhardt differs from many existentialists in seeing this condition not as a universal and timeless human condition, but as a social condition, a product of specific historical institutions and structures. He states explicitly in his discussion of crime and individualism: "But this individual development did not come upon him through any fault of his own, but rather through historical necessity" (p. 443). If Burckhardt is to be regarded as an existentialist, he is closest to the twentieth century existentialists who owe a debt to Marxism. He is rigorously materialist, not in a narrow sense, but in always identifying human action and the cumulation of human action into social structures as the causal force in human history. Like Marx, he stands Hegel back on his feet again, preserving the dialectic and the faith in cultural progress, but rejecting idealist mystifications.

To complete Burckhardt's portrait of the nature of social transitions, we can return to another idea that he shares with Marx, namely that there is a gap between reality and the ideological misunderstandings of it that human beings construct for themselves. The Renaissance with its invention of the objective study of nature and humanity took the first steps toward closing

this gap, that is, toward a scientific grasp of history and nature, freed from religious and pseudo-scientific mystifications. But the gap was by no means closed, and one of the most serious misunderstandings contained in Renaissance thought was precisely the conceptualization of the Renaissance itself. Despite their love of novelty, Renaissance intellectuals were virtually unable to perceive their age as a totality that broke completely with the past—as the first modern age. Given the difficulties of "thinking the future," they turned enthusiastically to the pagan past of classical antiquity. Burckhardt's ample description of this discovery (this "rebirth") parallels Marx' opening passage of The Eighteenth Brumaire; the citizens of the oligarchic republics of Italy played out their momentous step into modernity costumed as Athenians and Romans. They were able to grasp what they were doing politically, intellectually and artistically only by an analogy to classical antiquity. "But culture, as soon as it freed itself from the fantastic bonds of the Middle Ages, could not at once and without help find its way to the understanding of the physical and intellectual world. It needed a guide, and found one in the ancient civilization, with its wealth of truth and knowledge in every spiritual interest" (p. 182). This re-awakening of the past was an instance of *Aufhebung*, but also a mystification by a which a society misunderstood its construction of a new social reality. Thus Burckhardt, sharing Marx' Hegelian views, shares also the idea that the task of the social scientist and the social historian is to penetrate appearance and ideology, and to grasp the reality within.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding pages, the author has attempted to convey some of the insight and power of Burckhardt as a theorist of modernity. It is her hope that new generations of sociologists will read Burckhardt as one of the contributors to an understanding of our own society. Through his mass of vivid details about the Renaissance he designs a vision of how modernity emerged as a political and cultural totality. Paralleling Marx and anticipating Weber and Durkheim, he indentifies key features of modernity and its dynamic. The study of the Renaissance provides insight into the laws of motion of modern society, its contradictions, its terrors, and its hopes.

REFERENCES*

Bendix, Reinhard and Roth, Guenther. "Jacob Burckhardt." *Scholarship and Partisanship: Essays on Max Weber.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. Chapter XIV, pp. 266-281.

Berman, Marshall. *All That is Solid Melts into Air.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.

von Martin, Alfred. *The Sociology of the Renaissance.* New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

*All page numbers for the English edition refer to: Jacob Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy: Harper Row, 1929, reprinted as a Colophon edition, 1975.

Page numbers and references in German are based on the following edition: Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien: Ein Versuch. Herausgegeben von Werner Kaegi. Berlin und Leipzig: Deutsche Verlags Anstalt, 1930.