

## CLASS HANDOUT F-2 FLORENCE, READING 20

## ANOTHER VIEW OF RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

Here is another selection from *The Uses of the Past* by Herbert J. Muller. What questions does this material raise in opposition to the text readings?

Essentially, the distinctive values of the Renaissance were the Greek values that we have already reviewed. The natural man had been exuberant enough in the Middle Ages, but had been hidden behind the pious fictions, or portrayed only as a sinful man. Now the humanists became conscious of his worth, and gave much freer play to his creative powers. They idealized both the human body and the human spirit. They discovered new possibilities of truth, beauty, goodness, and joy, and the further possibility of harmonizing them. They discovered the individual, in pride rather than fear, and made him eager to be himself. And they were the more ardent because their humanism embraced the good earth and heaven too. The Church itself promoted the new art and learning. The popes began to make their worldly capital a splendid artistic image of the City of God, adorning it with the greatest religious painting and sculpture that Christendom has created. It appeared that the West might at last achieve a vital synthesis of Greek excellence and Christian piety.

In fact, however, the men typical of the Renaissance were neither good Greeks nor good Christians. Their "classical" art was baroque and became increasingly flamboyant and theatrical. Their learning was pedantic or merely literary; like the schoolmen, they mulled over ancient authorities. Above all, the new humanism was about as remote from social actualities as medieval other-worldliness had been. While the humanists celebrated the wisdom and virtue of the ancients, political and economic life in Italy became more brutal and sordid. While they recommended the golden mean, men remained devoted to medieval license and excess. The Renaissance produced the ideal of the courtier, the perfect gentleman so charmingly described by Castiglione, and it also produced the mercenary and condottiere, who were glorified as "soldiers of fortune". It was an age of treachery and devotion, brutality and civility, vice and grace, all fired by a love of gold, of beauty, of pleasure, of fame, and sometimes of God . . . .

The basic defect of the humanists was their ignorance of their own world, or academic aloofness from it. They displayed little interest in the explorations and inventions that were enlarging and transforming the world. They were as indifferent to science, when not supercilious. They had no clear or firm philosophy - thought did not become systematic again until Descartes.\*\* And they had no social or

\*Baroque refers to an artistic style of the seventeenth century. Its notable characteristics in the visual arts are elaborate and grotesque ornamentation. In music, baroque involves extreme contrasts and complex tensions. In literature, it is marked by complicated forms and bizarre imagery.

\*\*Rene' Descartes (1596-1650) was a French philosopher and mathematician known as the father of analytical geometry. By extending his mathematical methods into other areas of knowledge, Descartes lay the foundations for modern philosophy. The most succinct expression of his philosophical method is perhaps to be found in the statement "Cognito ergo sum", which translates as "I think, therefore I am."

political program. Although the humanists usually served the princes and disdained the common people. Their aristocratic bias was a matter of temperament or custom rather than principle; they accepted the social order in essentially the spirit of Leonardo da Vinci, who said simply, "I serve the one who pays me" - and in fact content to serve a French king who imprisoned for life his generous Italian patron. Fundamentally, they were less honest as well as less acute than Machiavelli, whose forthright acceptance of the realities of power politics has earned him an evil reputation.

In his realism Machiavelli was also aware of the bourgeois spirit that was producing the wealth on which the renaissance throve. The wise prince, he declared, might judiciously murder some of his subjects, "but above all things he is to have a care of entrenching upon their estates, for men do sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony." . . . Machiavelli was less aware, however, of the paradoxes that resulted from the growth of individualism and intellectual freedom. In the medieval order men had known a kind of psychological security; they took for granted all the actual insecurity of life in a vale of tears. With the disintegration of this order the self-conscious individual emerged; no longer bound to a fixed status and purpose in life, he developed a passion for wealth, power, or fame, which led to increasing restlessness, insecurity, and disorder; and presently he became the creator or the victim of new tyrannies.

On the lower levels of society men discovered that their measure of freedom entailed a loss of feudal rights and a slavery to the money market; they were free to sell their services, and free to starve if they found no buyer. The middle class found itself squeezed by its most rugged individualists, who began forming big commercial companies and monopolizing the market. All were subject to the growing power of kings, a secular instead of a theocratic absolutism. The State became the great individualists of the age. The State was an end in itself, wrote Machiavelli, subject to no law except its own interests, and required by these to keep enlarging its power at the expense of other states - it "must progress or decline." The growing nationalism made less sense because the new nations were as yet chiefly heterogeneous affairs, arbitrary products of conquest. (They anticipated the irony of the intense nationalism in Yugoslavia today - a nationality that was invented only in this century, and that embraces half a dozen different peoples.) And the most thoughtful men were discovering that the individual free to make his own life may be a lost and lonely man, uncertain of the meaning or purpose of his life. With the new stress on the dignity and worth of man came an increasing skepticism and pessimism about his destiny. With Rabelais\* came Montaigne.\*\* Finally came Hamlet - the epitome of the contradictions of the Renaissance.

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\*Francois Rabelais (1494?-1553) was a French satirist. In his most famous works, Pantagruel and Gargantua, he gave full vent to his bawdy and often grotesque humor.

\*\*Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533-1593) was a French essayist and courtier. His Essays express the skepticism of the times. Yet, in their awareness of human fallibility, they are, in fact, a study of the ideals of man. Montaigne had considerable influence on the literature of both France and England.