

OLLI LECTURE 3
JULY 9, 2013
RENAISSANCE Italy

- The WU experience and the dispute between Guaracelli and Riesenburger over the idea of the Renaissance.

Their debate hinged on a volume that had been published in 1860 by a Swiss historian, Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) which is still available in paperback today. It's called The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, published first in 1860. Burckhardt argued that modernity began in the Italian city states of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when the medieval world view collapsed and the Florentines, Milanese and the rulers of Venice dreamed of another way to construct the reality around them. They did it, he argued, through their art, their literature, their architecture, and even their politics. He called it "the Renaissance"--the rebirth. The word had been used before, but it was Burckhardt who made it enduring.

Let me read you a few lines from his masterpiece:

"The struggle between the popes and the Howenstaufen left Italy in a political condition which differed essentially from that of other countries of the West. While in France, Spain and England, the feudal system was so organized that, at the close of its existence, it was naturally transformed into a unified monarchy, and while in Germany it helped to maintain, at least outwardly, the unity of the empire, Italy had shaken it off almost entirely. The emperors of the fourteenth century, even in the most favorable case, were no longer received and respected as feudal lords, but as possible leaders and supporters of powers already in existence; while the Papacy, with its creatures and allies, was strong enough to hinder national unity in the future, but not strong enough itself to bring about that unity. 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. In them for the first time we detect the modern political spirit of Europe,

surrendered freely to its own instincts. Often displaying the worst features of an unbridled egotism, outraging every right, and killing every germ of a healthier culture. But, wherever this vicious tendency is overcome or in any way compensated, a new fact appears in history—the State as the outcome of reflection and calculation, the State as a work of art.”

The medievalists radically disagree, arguing that history doesn't work that way. Take, for example, Norman Cantor, who maintains in his splendid volume, Inventing the Middle Ages (1991), that even the idea of the Middle Ages is an incorrect intellectual construct. That's not how history unfolds, he argued. But something was going on in what we now call Italy in the early part of the second millennium and we can see it in its art, hear it in its music, read it in its literature, and observe it in its social life. Permit me to cite a few examples.

Here's a painting by Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337) that was produced at the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy (***) . It's called the "Kiss of Judas." Compare it with this medieval representation of the same event (***) . Something important has happened here in the human imagination.

- Even more dramatic are the works of Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374). Like Giotto, Petrarca (or Petrarch as we know him in English) was a native of Arezzo; not far from Florence. He started life as a priest, became a notary, a poet, and even a diplomat. He is not that well known today, but by some is called "the father of Humanism." He is renowned for his poetry (*Canzoniere*) and *I Tatti*, letters in exquisite Latin written to the ancients Cicero and Virgil. The importance of this correspondence is that it created the idea of the "Dark Ages," when classical culture was overwhelmed by barbarism. Petrarca insisted that the greatness of the past could be revived by relearning the scholarship of Greece and Rome; hence a *rinascimento* (rebirth) or a Renaissance, a term popularized later by the great French historian, Jules Michelet (1798-1855). It happened that in Petrarca's era Byzantium and its scholars were falling to the Islamic Turks and consequently

their wisdom was being transferred to the Latin West. What's stranger still is that this *rinascimento* occurred at almost the same time that the bubonic plague arrived once more in Europe, beginning with an outbreak in Sicily in 1347, eventually taking the lives of millions.

- Even earlier than Petrarca was Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), another Florentine, who was a friend of Petrarca's father. His elegant The Divine Comedy (13**?) satirized the medieval papacy and assigned some of his papal contemporaries to the innermost rings of hell. It was written in the Tuscan idiom and, thanks to Dante, in time that dialect became the basis of the modern Italian language.

There were and still are many dialects of Italian. That's partially due to the fact that there was no state called "Italy" until the middle of the nineteenth century. When the Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century AD, the Italian peninsula fell into a myriad of tiny pieces. There was the Venetian Republic; the Duchy of Milan; the Papal States; the Republic of Genoa; the Kingdom of Naples; and the Kingdom of Piedmont, which was occasionally united with the Island of Sardinia. I could go into more detail about this "Balkanization" of Italy, but suffice it to say that each of these sovereignties had its own traditions; its own dialects; and their own unique identities. For more than a thousand years they fought each other to maintain their uniqueness. In that process, as Burckhardt understood, some of them created the modern secular state.

One of my favorite episodes in Burckhardt's account of the Renaissance was when both the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor visited Milan at the invitation of its dictator, Ludovico Sforza (1452-1508), who styled himself "Duke of Milan." These two embodiments of the competing heads of Latin Christendom stood together on a balcony above Milan's central square to accept the applause of the city's population in their effort to end the centuries-long struggle between the papacy and the Empire. Ludovico later confessed that he was tempted to push them both off the balcony, thus ending the question of who was in charge. It was he who was the patron of the

Florentine Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)) and who commissioned his magnificent painting, "The Last Supper."

One of Ludovico's contemporaries and rivals was Lorenzo da Medici (1449-1492) who ruled the nearby Florentine Republic as a kind of "godfather." Lorenzo was the grandson of the great Florentine banker, Cosimo da Medici (d. 1469) who at the time of this death was one of Europe's wealthiest men. Lorenzo is often referred to as "the Magnificent" not only because he kept the peace in an unruly city-state, patronized the art of da Vinci, Michelangelo (1475-1564), and Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510); but also juggled relations between Naples, Venice, Milan, and the Papacy in order to prevent foreign intervention into Italian affairs. Not long after his death in April 1492, a Spaniard named Borgia was elected to the papacy, Columbus sailed to what he thought was India, and the French king sent an army into Italy.

You might ask what was the papacy doing in these wars among the Italian states? Well, it was centrally involved, hiring *condottieri* (mercenary generals) to fight its wars for it. Actually, one pope, Julius II (p. 1503-1513) was renowned at the time as "the warrior pope," leading troops into battle while at the same time hiring Michelangelo to complete the decoration of the Sistine Chapel. It was Julius who granted the newly-crowned English King Henry VIII the right to marry his late brother's wife, Catherine of Aragon, thus paving the way for the conflict that created the Anglican Church.

Pope Julius was born in 1443 as Giuliano della Rovere. The Roveres were one of the leading aristocratic families in Rome along with the Orsinis and others. They were bitterly opposed to the Spanish Borgias, whose son Rodrigo reigned as Pope Alexander VI from 1492-1503. These aristocratic rivalries, played out in the College of Cardinals, may explain why Leo X was awarded the papacy in 1513. He was a Medici from Florence and neither a Spaniard nor a Roman. It was he who held the throne of St. Peter when an obscure German monk named Martin Luther posted his famed 95 Theses on the door of the Cathedral at Wittenberg in 1519. Among other indictments, Luther blasted Pope Leo for granting indulgences to raise money for

the reconstruction of St. Peter's. Pope Leo, the second son of Lorenzo "the Magnificent," was a great patron of the arts.

The works of the Renaissance popes gave us some of the great sights of contemporary Rome; but they also gave us the Protestant Reformation. In fact, however, the Italian Renaissance began fading even before Martin Luther. As I mentioned earlier, French armies invaded Milan in 1494, touching off warfare between the powerful French monarchy and Italy's hopelessly divided polities that would last for more than a century. Once the French crossed the border, the rulers of the newly-created Spanish state thought that they should intervene to counteract this French bid for hegemony on the Italian peninsula. That fighting lasted for more than a century and involved great armies and not just military contractors, like the *condottieri*. The French and the Spanish really meant to kill each other and the Spanish were good at it. One of their commanders, Gonzalo Fernandez of Cordoba (1453-1515) is revered to this day in Spain as "*el grand capitan.*" At one point in 1525 the King of France, Francis I (1494-1547) was actually captured by Spanish troops at Pavia, Italy and he and his tent were sent back to Spain as hostages [Franco and the tent].

While these Christian armies were fighting amongst themselves, the Ottoman Turks were advancing on the West, taking Constantinople in 1453, Athens in 1458, and menacing Vienna as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century. At about the same time, Martin Luther's protest against papal policy set off civil war in Germany, France, and even Britain. Small wonder that the Italian Renaissance, with its celebration of humanism (the dignity of humanity) faded slowly from the intellectual skies.

I cannot end this commentary on the Italian Renaissance without mentioning Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). He was another Florentine who tried in his exquisite volume The Prince (1513) to educate the Medici family in how to run a modern, secular state. He posed to them the impossible question: which is better--to be loved or to be feared. He came down on the side of fear. He lived out his years in exile but his analysis of modern politics remains

a classic. Political power in his day was no longer derived from religious sanction, he observed. It was derived as Chairman Mao once wrote, "from the barrel of a gun."