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Jacob Burckhardt: Tradition and the Crisis of Western Culture

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BY THE SECOND HALF of the nineteenth century it was clear that the French Revolution had ushered in an era of cultural crisis unprecedented in nature. To a far greater extent than the Renaissance and Reformation the French Revolution broke the pattern of the past, overturned the previous religious, social and political order and promised a new and perfected humanity. The Jacobin terror which became the revolution's hallmark ushered in the tyranny of Napoleon. In the half century which followed the French Revolution, wave after revolutionary wave challenged the stability of state and society in Europe and Latin America. Revolutionary equality became more important ideologically than liberty, and socialism promised the bright future which the French Revolution failed to provide. The Restoration of the ancient order after 1815 was only partially successful and, although general war was avoided until 1914 and aristocratic society maintained a tenuous power in Europe, industrialization and urbanization continued the work of radical social transformation which the French Revolution

had begun. Secular intellectuals who increasingly displaced the clergy carried forward the anti-religious ideology of the *philosophes* and their devotion to social transformation.

It was in this atmosphere that the great pessimistic philosophies of history were born—philosophies of history which were anti-progressive and conservative, anti-Hegelian, anti-Marxist and anti-democratic. But beyond a rejection of the progressivism and belief in social transformation which philosophies of history stemming from the thought of Kant and Hegel produced, the pessimist philosophers of history sought to explain the historical reasons for the crisis of European culture and to predict the path of historical development which this crisis would take.

Of course, until World War I the philosophers of progress and socialism dominated European thought even as Marxists, racists, and feminists still dominate faculties of history in American universities. Of the Whig interpretation of history, as David Cannadine so ably demonstrates in his recent biography, *G.M. Trevelyan, A Life in History*, only World War I shook the faith of Whiggery's high priest in inevitable progress. However at the war's end Trevelyan told his

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mother, "I believe democracy is on the march now, all along the line, the world's great age begins anew." "[The] despotisms of the ancient regime in Central and Eastern Europe" had at last been overthrown and this held out the prospect of a "new era"; a "bold adventure" [in European history might begin].¹ As Trevelyan was shortly to see, this "new era" saw the collapse of European culture and the rise of the dictators.

Following World War I the mood of Europe became pessimistic. No historian in the inter-war years enjoyed a wider reading public or sold more copies of his work than Oswald Spengler, the author of *The Decline of the West*. Following World War II Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* found a similar wide readership and influence. These works continued and brought to full flower the pessimistic historical tradition which found its inception as a response to the French revolution.

Marx and Lenin saw the French Revolution, progressivism and the truncated and superficial philosophy of the *philosophes* as directly ancestral to the Russian Revolution. In 1989 that revolutionary tradition was swept away. Two hundred years of revolutionary agony died in a few months when the human mind once more looked upon the outlines of reality and achieved something resembling clarity. In the great political interregnum which has followed, in the light of the death of political ideas and political leadership which had developed in the Western world, it is false to speak of "the end of history." It is far more accurate to speak of the death of humanity and particularly those humane values which had their basis in Christianity and in Western rationalism. Suddenly the pessimism of Lasaulx, of Burckhardt, of Nietzsche, of Spengler and of Toynbee appears to be more than justified. The world has literally cut itself adrift from meaning.

The collapse has not come all at once. The disintegrative processes have been at work for over 200 years. In July 1871, writing in the shadow of the defeat of France in the Franco/Prussian war and the establishment of the Paris commune, the first Soviet style government in Europe according to Lenin, Jacob Burckhardt, the historian who invented the Renaissance, tells his friend Friedrich von Preen (1823-1894)

...up till now, for two hundred years, people in England have imagined that every problem could be solved through Freedom, and could let opposites correct one another in the free interplay of argument. But what now? The great harm was begun in the last century, mainly through Rousseau, with his doctrine of the goodness of human nature. Out of this plebs and educated alike distilled the doctrine of the golden age that was to come quite infallibly, provided people were left alone. The result, as every child knows, was the complete disintegration of the idea of authority in the heads of mortals, whereupon of course, we periodically fall victims to sheer power. In the meanwhile, the idea of the natural goodness of man has turned, among the intelligent strata of Europe, into the idea of progress, *i.e.* undisturbed money-making and modern comforts, with philanthropy as a sop to conscience....

The only conceivable salvation would be for this insane optimism, great and small, to disappear from peoples' brains. But then our present-day Christianity is not equal to the task; it has gone in for and got mixed up with optimism for the last two hundred years. A change will and must come, but after God knows how much suffering. In the meanwhile you are building schools—at least you can take responsibility for that before God; while I instruct my pupils and audience. I make no great secret of my philosophy to my students; the clever ones understand me, and as at the same time I do everything in every way I can to honor the real happiness that study and knowledge give one—

however little it may be in itself—I am able to give each one some degree of consolation.²

In what follows I wish to discuss the pessimistic historical thought of Jacob Burckhardt, its origins as a response to the work of Ernst von Lasaulx (1805-1861), the relationship of these thinkers to the problem of cultural crisis, and the bearing their thought has on contemporary conservative thought.

Let us begin with Burckhardt as he has exerted the greater influence on contemporary conservatism and was by all odds the more important historian. It is well to remember that the conservative revival in the 1950s was powerfully influenced by the revival and reading of certain authors: Burke, Tocqueville, Acton, de Maistre and Burckhardt. (Of course, there were many other lesser nineteenth-century figures and contemporary writers such as Hayek who played an important role in the conservative revival.)

Jacob Burckhardt was born in 1818 in Basel, Switzerland, and died in the same city in 1897. His family was patrician-bourgeois and had long been involved in the economic, political, and cultural life of Basel. He was educated at the University of Berlin where he was von Ranke's student and at the University of Bonn where he and his friend Carl Schurtz were both members of the circle of Professor Gottfried Kinkel. Early in 1845 he became editor of an important conservative newspaper, the *Basler Zeitung*, a post in which he served for 18 months. In 1844 he was given the honorary title of Professor at the tiny University of Basel, a post he held with one interruption until 1895—virtually the remainder of his life. When von Ranke retired at Berlin in June 1872 Burckhardt was offered the position. It was the premier historical post in the world and Burckhardt declined, no doubt because Prussia had become the epitome of everything in the modern

world which Burckhardt detested: centralization, growing democratization, the commercial spirit, militarism, and a crass and vulgar smartness. Burckhardt preferred culture to conquest.

Burckhardt was unabashedly elitist and aristocratic in his values. The Renaissance he viewed as an elite culture. While skeptical of the claims of orthodox Christianity, he was a Christian in ethical practice and hoped that a religious rebirth would rescue Europe from decadence and disaster. Both socialism and materialism he held to be evidences of cultural decline. He detested militarism and the pursuit of power. He believed that the world of the nineteenth century was moving inexorably toward a socialist tyranny. He saw the French Revolution and the Paris Commune as the beginnings of this tragic development.

On March 20, 1868, Burckhardt checked out of the Basel University library a book, *Studies Concerning Classical Antiquity*, which had been written by Ernst von Lasaulx, a professor of classical philology at the University of Munich. This was the beginning of Burckhardt's preoccupation with the historical theories of Ernst von Lasaulx. Lasaulx had published a book, *Philosophy of History*, in 1856, and it was this work that directly influenced the writing of Burckhardt's classic, *Reflections on History*, (*Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*).

Burckhardt was accustomed to giving public lectures which he regarded as a civic responsibility. He thought that nothing could be more important than the education of his fellow citizens of Basel. The first draft of *Reflections on History* was written during the summer of 1868. He delivered the separate lectures as a course at the University and then as public lectures, revising the text repeatedly. The lectures were written, consequently, before the cataclysmic events of the Franco-Prussian war and the Paris Commune. The lectures in a

general way anticipate the events.

Reflections on History is a comprehensive conservative analysis of the historical process. I did not say "philosophy of history" for Burckhardt believed that philosophy and history were incompatible. Nor could Burckhardt discern in the historical process a system, causal and determined. When, in 1874, the young Nietzsche, his colleague at Basel, sent him a copy of his collected essays, *Thought out of Season* (*Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*), Burckhardt wrote him:

In the first place my poor head has never been capable of reflecting, at a distance, as you are able to do, upon final causes, the aims and the desirability of history. As a teacher and professor I can, however, maintain that I have never taught history for the sake of what goes under the high-falutin' name of "world history," but essentially as a propaedeutic study: my task has been to put people into the possession of the scaffolding which is indispensable if their future studies of whatever kind were not to be aimless. I have done everything I possibly could to lead them on to acquire personal possession of the past—in whatever shape and form—and at least not to sicken them of it; I wanted them to be capable of picking the fruits for themselves; I never dreamt of training scholars and disciples in the narrower sense, but only wanted to make every member of the audience feel and know that everyone may appropriate those aspects of the past which appeal to him and that there might be happiness in so doing....³

Much earlier in his life, when he was only 24 years of age, he had written Karl Frecinius who was a friend and member of the Kinkel circle, and I might add, a philosopher (June 19, 1842):

Although you are a philosopher, you must allow me the truth of the following: a man like me, who is altogether incapable of speculation, and who does not apply himself to abstract thought for a single minute in the whole year, does best to try and

clarify the most important questions of his life and studies in the way that comes naturally to him. My surrogate is *contemplation*, daily clearer and directed more and more upon essentials. I cling by nature to the concrete, to visible nature, and to history. But as a result of drawing ceaseless analogies between *facta* (which comes naturally to me) I have succeeded in abstracting much that is universal. Above this manifold universal there hovers, I know, a still higher universal, and perhaps I shall be able to mount that step too one day. You would not believe how, little by little, as a result of this possibly onesided effort, the *facta* of history, works of art, the monuments of all ages gradually acquire significance as witnesses to a past stage in the development of the spirit. Believe me when I see the present lying quite clearly in the past, I feel moved by a shudder of profound respect. The highest conception of the history of mankind: the development of the spirit of freedom, has become my leading conviction, and consequently why studies cannot be untrue to me, cannot let me down, and must remain my good genius all through my life.⁴

I give these two long quotations in order to point out and to underline a number of very important ideas in Burckhardt's conception of history, ideas which place him in contradiction to the historical philosophy of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, and ideas which are of vital importance to us as free men today.

The first of these ideas is the complete rejection of history as a science of causes. For Burckhardt, history is a science of values, a science of choice. He rejects completely the German "idealist" philosophical system and its expression in philosophical terms. He saw clearly that the historical system of Kant, Hegel, and Marx would result in man's enslavement and dehumanization. It is essential to an understanding of history to realize that men make history by their

choices rather than men being formed through the causal determinisms of reason and class. One hundred and fifty years later, after the slave system of Marxism has collapsed and its historical justification has been abandoned by everyone except professors at American universities, we recognize the prescience of Burckhardt.

When we read Burckhardt's lecture entitled "The Great Men of History" in *Reflections on History* we are immediately struck by its contradiction of Hegel's concept of the Hero in *Philosophy of History*. One will recall that for Hegel the great man of history is only the unwitting fool of the World Spirit which, through the cunning of reason, tricks him into the achievement of the spirit's aims. The great man is the man who shapes history, who himself embodies and articulates the spirit. Burckhardt writes:

We are now faced with the following mysterious turn of fate. Peoples, religions, things, whose significance seemed to reside only in their totality, which seemed to be only the products and manifestations of that totality, are suddenly given a new content or a commanding expression by great individuals.⁵

Later in his discussion Burckhardt observes:

It is true that, at the onset of a crisis, there is always a superfluity of men regarded as great, since those who happen to be party leaders—often men of genuine talent and initiative—are indulgently regarded as such. A judgment of this kind is based on the naive assumption that a movement must find from the outset the man who will permanently and completely represent it. In actual fact, it is soon involved in transformations of which there was no inkling in its initial stage.⁶

It is especially important to note that the greatest men, the truly transforming heroes of world history, are the founders

of religion, the poets, the artists, and those who transform values and free mankind from slavery to the material. It must be said here that Burckhardt viewed money-making and the pursuit of material abundance as a rather low form of human activity and one which interfered with spiritual development.

For this reason Burckhardt saw cultural history as the primary, the essential historical study. Burckhardt says in his introduction to the *Cultural History of Greece* (*Griechische Kulturgeschichte*)

...[cultural history] concerns itself with a past humanity and makes known what this [inner life] was, what it willed, thought, perceived and what it aspired to.... What was willed and aspired to is therefore as important as that which came to pass, the intention as important as any action....⁷

The emphasis in Burckhardt's cultural analysis is on value, choice, aspiration rather even than achievement. We as men are what we are because of what we wish to be. However, what we are and what we wish to be is bound up with what we have been in the past. History is, for Burckhardt, tradition. Let us take the example of the *Cultural History of the Greeks*. Burckhardt wrote his study of Greek culture because, he said,

Since Winkelmann, Lessing and the translation of Hauer by Voss the feeling has developed that a holy wedding (*hieros gamos*) exists between the Hellenic and the German spirit, a special relationship and understanding as is the case with no other people in the modern Western world. The minds of Goethe and Schiller were formed by the classics.⁸

Of course one might ask, as many half-educated professors are now asking, "Why continue this relationship?" "Why be bound by tradition?" "Why permit the past to participate in the shaping of our present?" To which Burckhardt replied:

Now, however, it is the special duty of the educated to fill out as completely as possible the picture of the continuity of historical development which distinguishes him as possessing consciousness, from a barbarian who is unconscious, just as the perception of the past and the future in general distinguish men from animals, and the past generates reproaches and the future generates anxieties of which the animals know nothing....⁹

In short, Burckhardt is saying that the knowledge of the past, that tradition, is the distinctive mark of our humanity. For animals the past is instinct; for human beings the past is conscious awareness and the ability to choose. It is not that the past stands in the way of our full human development. Rather, the past and the future make the achievement of our humanity possible.

These three fundamental notions—the gulf between history and philosophy and the rejection of all philosophies of history; the role of mankind in making history through free choice rather than the determination of human history through deterministic causal forces; and the role of history and tradition in the formation of a distinctively human consciousness in contrast to that of animals—are the basic ideas in Burckhardt's view of history. They are, indeed, the pivotal ideas in the struggle of the contemporary conservative historian against the forces of historical determinism and the dehumanization of mankind.

It is clear that Burckhardt believed that human freedom realized itself more fully and spiritual achievement was higher and more complete in certain historical eras than in others. For Burckhardt there was a great oscillation between eras of high culture and spiritual achievement and eras of decline and human abasement. Burckhardt repeats over and over again that high cultures are not eras of happiness and self-satisfied enjoyment. For example he

quotes the German historian of ancient Greece, Böckh, as saying, "the Hellenes were more unfortunate than most believe,"¹⁰ and Burckhardt's *Cultural History of Greece* underlines this proposition. Moreover, Burckhardt's *Essay on the Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* makes clear repeatedly that ages of great cultural creativity are not times of placid goodness.

One of the chief characteristics of these culturally creative eras is their location in small city-states. For Burckhardt small is beautiful. The opposite of the city-state is in Burckhardt's thought the highly centralized, geographically enlarged state such as the Rome of Constantine the Great, the French Empire of Louis Napoleon, the German Empire after 1871. For Burckhardt these regimented societies dominated by the military and the bureaucracy were the wave of the future, until such time as conditions which would make possible the freedom, spirituality, and creativity returned. Until that time it was, Burckhardt believed, his role and the role of men like himself to preserve the spiritual achievement, particularly the religion, the art, and the literature of the past, until a better day arrives.

However, not only were size and centralization in the state the great enemies of culture, but also power itself was demonic in character and was always destructive of the human good. In *Reflections on History*, in the lecture entitled "The Three Powers," Burckhardt states unequivocally:

Now the truth is—we have only to think of Louis XIV, Napoleon, and the revolutionary popular governments—that power is in itself evil. Utterly regardless of all religion, the privilege of egoism, which is denied to the individual, is bestowed on the state. Weaker neighbors are subjected and annexed, or in some way deprived of their independence, not in order to forestall hostilities on their part, for that

hardly costs a thought, but to prevent another taking them and turning them to its own political ends. And once on that road, there is no stopping. There is an excuse for everything....¹¹

It has been argued by Carl Schmidt that Burckhardt is ambiguous in his attitude to power. That can hardly be the case, for in the lecture, entitled "The Reciprocal Action of the Three Powers," Burckhardt returns to the subject of power.

First and foremost however, what the nation desires, implicitly or explicitly, is power.... More specifically, the idea is to make the general will of the nation felt abroad, in defiance of other nations.

Hence, first, the hopelessness of any attempt at decentralization, of any voluntary restriction of power in favor of local and civilized life. The central will can never be too strong.

Now power is of its nature evil, whoever wields it. It is not stability but a lust, and *ipso facto* insatiable, therefore unhappy in itself and doomed to make others unhappy.

Inevitably, in its pursuit, peoples fall into the hands both of ambitious dynasties seeking to maintain themselves, and of individual "great men," etc., that is, of the forces which have the furtherance of culture least at heart.¹²

This is a remarkable refutation of the power-oriented philosophy of Hegel who saw the man of power, the hero, as the tool of the world-spirit in the accomplishment of "the next sequent step in history." Burckhardt not only rejects Hegel but also the whole political tradition of the modern state deriving from Machiavelli, who held that the single dynamic force in the state was the drive to power and endless expansion.

Machiavelli and Hegel saw power in terms of the state, but Nietzsche, Burckhardt's young colleague at the University of Basel, believed that the

"will to power" was the key to nobility and aristocratic human natures. Little wonder that Burckhardt felt himself eventually estranged from and out of sympathy with Nietzsche. Burckhardt wrote in *Reflections on History* ("Great Men of History"):

It is better to pass over in silence the further error which consists in assuming that power is happiness, and that happiness is something due and proper to man. Nations have definite qualities to bring to light without which the world would be incomplete and they must do so without any respect to the happiness of the individual or the greatest possible sum of happiness.¹³

Burckhardt's mentor at the University of Berlin, the great Leopold von Ranke, had taught that power was the outward manifestation of interior spiritual forces, that all power was a manifestation of a spiritual dynamic. For this reason, Ranke in his historical studies placed a major emphasis on foreign affairs rather than domestic policy. The Rankean dictum of the primacy of foreign affairs ("*primat des Aussenpolitik*") came to dominate nineteenth century historical writing and the public policy of the states. Burckhardt breaks completely with this tradition.

It was clear to Burckhardt that the Europe of his day was in the midst of a great crisis, superficially political but in fact, cultural and spiritual in character. He shared this view with his colleagues at Basel, Friedrich Nietzsche and Johannes Bachofen. His sensitivities to the perceptions of this crisis were sharpened by his having read Ernst von Lasaulx's *Philosophie der Geschichte*. But unlike Nietzsche and Lasaulx, Burckhardt had no systematic explanation of the sources of this spiritual and cultural crisis. This fact makes Burckhardt's lecture, "The Crises of History," in *Reflections on History* something of a disappointment.

In 1815, at the end of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, Europeans generally believed that the forces of change could be turned back and that romantic conservatism would restore traditional society. The restoration, it was believed, not only would turn back the clock but also would, in the future, perfect past political systems. It is well to realize that there are Utopias of the Right as well as Utopias of the Left. That, of course, did not happen, for the flight of time's arrow is unidirectional. Lasaulx put the matter succinctly when he said,

...I belong to those who do not believe in political restoration; there is no such thing. All restorations which have been attempted have failed after a short time There are no ways back; the gates are closed, the bridges are down, the ships are burned. The command of history is a "forward march!" even though we march to death.¹⁴

Burckhardt, too, felt the forces leading to the crisis of his day to be inexorable. Still, based on his study of the reign of Constantine and the history of the Renaissance, he was not a pessimist without hope. Burckhardt wrote, in the lecture on "The Crises of History," in *Reflections on History*:

In praise of crises, we might say that passion is the mother of great things, real passion, that is, bent on the new and not merely on the overthrow of the old. Unexpected forces awake in individuals and even heaven takes on a difficult hue. Whoever is anybody can make himself felt because barriers have been or are

being trampled down.

Crises and even their accompanying fanaticisms are (though always according to the age of the people passing through them) to be regarded as a genuine sign of vitality. The crisis itself is an expedient of nature, like a fever, and the fanaticisms are signs that there still exist for men things they prize more than life and property. Yet men must not merely be fanatics in opposition to others and quivering egoists for themselves.

All spiritual growth takes place by leaps and bounds, both in the individual and, as here, in the community. The crisis is to be regarded as a new nexus of growth.¹⁵

He then reminds us that art and literature particularly flourish in periods of crisis. To drive his point home he adds:

If it had not been for the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west, St. Augustine's *City of God* would not have become such a great and independent book, while Dante wrote the *Divina Commedia* in exile.¹⁶

What is one to do in the midst of cultural crisis? What is the role of the noble man under such circumstances? For Burckhardt the path was clear.

Everything depends on how our generation stands the test. It may well be that frightful times are ahead, and an age of deepest misery. We should like to know on which wave we are driving forward—only we form part of it. But mankind is not destined to perish yet, and nature creates as liberally as before. But if happiness is to be found in the midst of our misfortunes, it can only be a spiritual one....¹⁷

1. David Cannadine, *G.M. Trevelyan, A Life in History* (New York, 1992), 87. 2. *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, selected, edited, and translated by Alexander Dru (New York, 1955), 148. 3. *Ibid.*, 158. 4. *Ibid.*, 73-74. 5. Jacob Burckhardt, "Great Men of History," in *Reflections on History*, translated by M.D.H. (Indianapolis, 1979), 273. 6. *Ibid.*, 293. 7. Jacob Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte, Staat*

und Religion, edited by Rudolf Marx (Leipzig, N.D.), translation my own, 6. 8. *Ibid.*, 13. 9. *Ibid.*, 15. 10. *Ibid.*, 14. 11. Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, 67. 12. *Ibid.*, 139. 13. *Ibid.*, 301. 14. Remigius Stolze, *Ernst von Lasaulx*, 212. 15. Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, 248. 16. *Ibid.*, 249. 17. *The Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, 33-34.