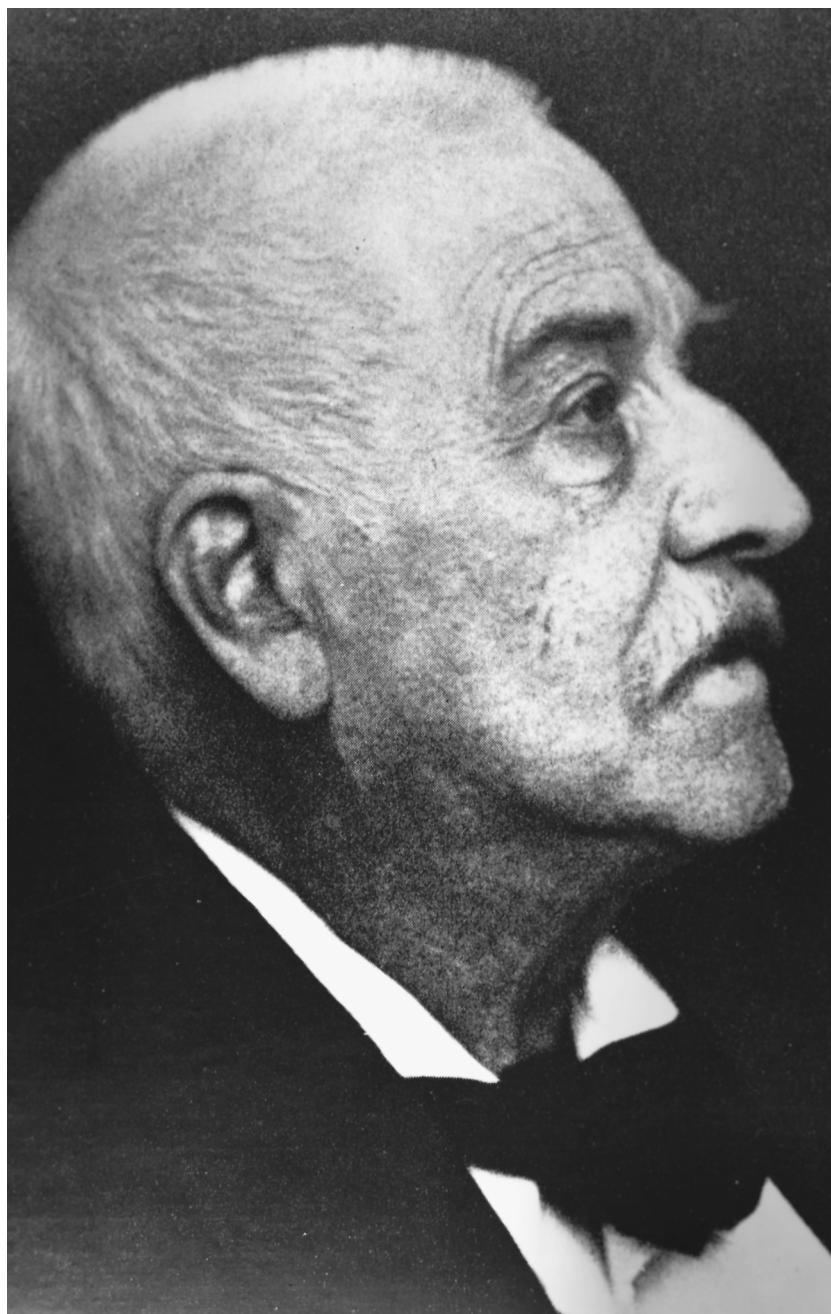


Judgments on History and Historians



JACOB BURCKHARDT

Judgments
on History
and
Historians

Translated by Harry Zohn

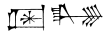
WITH A FOREWORD BY ALBERTO R. COLL



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Foreword

Readers should beware. This is a profoundly counter-cultural book, unabashedly and defiantly so. It takes on the prevailing truisms of our time across the entire political spectrum: the goodness of popular egalitarian democracy; the superiority of untrammelled capitalism and its consumerist, materialistic ethos; and the benefits of a welfare state that paternally provides for all. Jacob Burckhardt (1818–97) also strenuously challenged the notion, already widespread in his time and held even more tenaciously today, that the essence of history for the past four hundred years has been the march of progress and enlightenment.

In this book, composed of notes and manuscript fragments for lectures he delivered at the University of Basel between 1865 and 1885, Burckhardt carried on the debate against the numerous historians and commentators from Voltaire onward who insisted on judging the past against the standards of rationalism and liberalism that arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While Burckhardt disagreed on many things with his former mentor Leopold von Ranke, he shared Ranke's view that "every generation is equidistant from God." An age may have a level of material prosperity or intellectual and artistic excellence lower than that of another, but it is not thereby inferior in its capacity for spiritual insight or nobility. Every historical epoch has its own intrinsic meaning and its own contribution to make to the collected intellectual and artistic treasures of humankind. The task of the historian, far from judging all things by virtue of their contribution to modernity, is to explore every corner of the past with an appreciative eye

for the wonder and essential mystery behind the process of human creativity.

By taking this stand, Burckhardt emerged in most refreshing contrast with his contemporaries and many of his successors. For what he developed was nothing short of a psychology of historiography. The historian is to observe, contemplate, and enjoy the incredibly glorious richness of the human experience. He is to look for human greatness and creativity everywhere, even in periods that might seem alien and distant from him. His spirit ought to be one of enquiry, wonder, and empathy. Insofar as he allows himself to make moral judgments about the past, these judgments should be based not on contemporary verities but on more universal values. Thus, we may judge Tamerlane for his hideous massacres of innocent women and children, but it makes no sense to judge Charlemagne for his authoritarianism. Beyond all this, the historian is to search everywhere for the priceless achievements of the human spirit that transcend politics and economics—those great works of artistic and literary beauty and power, and those deeds of courage, nobility, and grandeur—which grace the history of civilization and inspire later generations.

Despite his injunction not to judge the past, Burckhardt did not hesitate to judge the present, with all of its smugness and self-confidence. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, he had deep misgivings about the advent of popular egalitarian democracy, which he believed would lead to ever higher levels of vulgarity, the simplification and corruption of culture and politics, and eventually the tyranny of demagogues. The main problem with popular democratic culture was its deification of equality as the ruling principle in all of life. It was one thing to argue that all men should be equal before the law, an idea Burckhardt did not find problematic, but quite another to argue that all men are equal, and even more pernicious to suggest that all beliefs, opinions, and ways of life are of equal worth, a *reductio ad absurdum* that Burckhardt believed would lead to the death of culture and the return of barbarism.

Burckhardt was equally harsh toward another idol of the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries, namely, the spread of economic growth and development as the essence of “progress.” Sometime during the seventeenth century, many people had come to believe that the chief end of life is to acquire material possessions and live with the greatest possible comfort and material ease. This belief, coupled with the growth of capitalism, industrialization, and ever more inventive technologies for the economic exploitation of the earth’s resources, had created a culture of hectic acquisitiveness, materialism, and spiritual and aesthetic squalor. Burckhardt was appalled at the human, cultural, and environmental costs of this ever more voracious Behemoth. Late in the nineteenth century, he wondered what would have happened to the earth if capitalism, industrialization, and science had begun their joint work three or four centuries earlier. What would be left by now? he asked.

At a time when liberals everywhere were celebrating the aristocracy’s decline, and Bismarck, with the support of the Reichstag, was busy organizing the first welfare state, Burckhardt noticed one central fact: the unrelenting growth since the sixteenth century of the power of the state. The new paternal state, despite its benevolent trappings, carried the potential for the unlimited exercise of power and despotism. With such barriers to state power as the Church and the aristocracy weakened by the advance of popular democracy, egalitarianism, and industrialization, it seemed to Burckhardt only a matter of time before state power would be put in the service of tyranny.

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, Burckhardt’s observations appear as luminous and insightful as ever. Having barely escaped from the tyrannies of fascism and communism and the cataclysms of two world wars—all of which Burckhardt more or less predicted—many peoples are becoming as smug as Burckhardt’s contemporaries. Millions see democracy, capitalism, consumerism, and technology as unlimited boons, and have no tolerance for anyone who might raise troublesome questions about these forces. Yet our triumphalism could use some tempering.

The mix of egalitarianism, consumerism, and the welfare state has produced widespread moral decay, political apathy, and an increasing dissonance between the requirements of a regime of ordered liberty and the capacity of that regime's citizens to fulfill those requirements. It is inarguable that Western societies are facing serious long-term problems. The exercise of liberty requires moral and intellectual virtues that oppose those habits fostered by the reigning economic, social, and cultural elites. The virtue most essential to liberty is self-control, yet the ruling principle behind egalitarianism, Hollywood-style hedonism, and unbridled materialism is the notion that one's appetites for pleasure and possessions should brook no limits.

For Burckhardt, another troubling aspect of modernity that has become even more destructive during the twentieth century is the Promethean quality of modern civilization. Long before the advent of nuclear and biological weapons, genetic engineering, and widespread environmental devastation, Burckhardt worried about where science, the primacy of economics, and the state's endless quest for power would take the West. In his own time, he despised the railroads, the ugly factories blighting Europe's beautiful countryside, and the rise of powerful nation-states armed with ever mightier arsenals of military technology. He saw these as elements in a relentless process as destructive of higher culture and the good life as the marriage of egalitarianism, consumerism, and the welfare state. At the dawn of the twenty-first century we have even stronger grounds for apprehension about where all this might end. Armed with Burckhardt's understanding of the dark side of human nature—itself a fruit of his intimate acquaintance with the tragic character of history—we reasonably can fear that the future will be more problematic than the optimists insist.

In spite of his scorn for democracy and much of modernity, Burckhardt was a philosopher of freedom on several grounds. First, he was a passionate believer in the human spirit and its ability to rise to great heights in the midst of the bleakest circumstances. No historian has affirmed the weight of human freedom against historical necessity

more persistently than Burckhardt. The long-term trends and powerful impersonal forces all count, but so does the lonely genius—such as Luther or Michelangelo—striving to affirm his inner vision. History is full of broken trends that at one point seemed to stretch infinitely into the future but then moved in radically new and unexpected directions; many of these great historical surprises have occurred because of the force of human personality. In other words, there is freedom in the midst of necessity.

Secondly, Burckhardt affirmed that the highest form of freedom is inward—that is, the freedom to maintain one's soul and mind sufficiently detached from and independent of the ruling passions and conventional wisdom of the moment. Therefore, a society that aspires to be called free must defend those institutions, such as independent wealth and centers of economic and social power free from the state, that facilitate intellectual, artistic, and spiritual freedom. This view distinguished Burckhardt from the socialists, with their hankering after centralization, as well as from the liberal egalitarians, with their obsessive desire to destroy every vestige of privilege and inequality. Lastly, Burckhardt believed that a free society needs to guard against the demagogue—the “great man”—who in the name of the people would increase his own power and that of the state, and impose uniformity.

As uneasy as Burckhardt was with the forces shaping Western civilization in his lifetime, he was far from ready to renounce the West's heritage or be ashamed of it. He marvelled at the achievements of Western civilization, and particularly at the spiritual and artistic ones, which he believed were far more significant than the material and technological ones. Deeply aware of the multicultural richness of his own world, he believed it was incumbent on the heirs of Western civilization to know well their own particular cultural inheritance. There was no better place to start than the culture and heritage of classical Athens, where the idea of freedom first had flowered alongside some of the most sublime artistic and literary works in all of history. (It would have been better for all humankind, he noted, if Athens, not Sparta, had been

victorious in the Peloponnesian War.) Burckhardt had one name for those not interested in their past: “barbarians.” He was quick to judge Americans for their plutocratic ways, but he judged them even more harshly because he thought they did not believe they had much of value to gain from studying history. Indeed, in his opinion, Americans took pride in being “new,” that is, in having no history.

Burckhardt found his ideal political community in the small city-states of Athens and Florence, where with varying degrees of success freedom had flourished together with high culture (literature, music, and the fine arts). The modern world, with its relentless march toward gargantuan cities in which human beings lead an alienated, lonely, stupefied existence anchored in triviality, vulgarity, and material satiety, frightened him. Yet he was too much of a skeptic to believe that there is a solution to this problem in the form of either a political ideology or a “great man” who could bring about a new renaissance. If there was a renaissance ahead, it would come about, Burckhardt surmised, as the unexpected fruit of the human spirit and the quiet work of a few individuals—“secular monks,” he called them—who did not care about power but cherished the characteristics of the culture of “old Europe,” foremost among these being the love of freedom and beauty. In the annals of Western historiography, few voices can match Burckhardt’s in his affirmation of the grandeur of the human spirit or his insistence on the irreducible nature of freedom as an end in itself.

Alberto R. Coll