

# The development of individuality in the modern world essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Development of Individuality in the Modern World: Burckhardt's View on the Renaissance in Italy Individuality and Cultural History In Reflections on History Jacob Burckhardt describes that " culture may be defined as the sum total of those mental developments which take place spontaneously and lay no claim to universal or compulsive authority" (55) and claims that culture is developed as a process of human mental activities, " The spearhead of all Culture is a miracle of mind - speech, whose spring, independently of the individual people and its individual language, is in the soul, otherwise no deaf-mute could be taught to speak and to understand speech. Such teaching is only explicable if there is in the soul an intimate and responsive urge to clothe thought in words" (56).

He continues to discuss that culture can highly be developed as the movement of renaissance showed. As he explains that the Italian and European movement of renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Renaissance was a special pure renaissance and " its specific characteristics were its spontaneity, the evidential vitality through which it triumphed, its extension, to a greater or less degree, to every possible domain of life, e. g. the idea of the State, and finally, its European character, (ibid.

: 63-64) Burckhardt attempts to argue that the Renaissance was the crux that enabled the development of individuality. David Riesman in Individualism Reconsidered explains the situation of the movement of individualism, " Men of the emerging middle classes, after the Renaissance, were turned loose in an economic order freed from the supervision of mercantilism, in a political order freed from the supervision of an hereditary aristocracy, in a religious order freed from the supervision of ecclesiastical

<https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-individuality-in-the-modern-world-essay/>

hierarchy” (26). He also points out that individualism had appeared not only in business and colonization, but also in many reform movements for several hundred years (27-28). Therefore, the Renaissance played an important role in the development of human history and made a great impact on the development of individuality.

But what is the connection between individuality and cultural history? James Lull in *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach* interprets the meaning of culture. As he depicts that, “ culture is a complex and dynamic ecology of people, things world views, activities, and settings that fundamentally endures but is also changed in routine communication and social interaction. Culture is context,” (66) to human, culture is the non-finished interactive social phenomenon and every individual is responsible of this interaction. That means, in modern culture, individuality is the necessary ingredient in the process of development of culture and civilization.

As Lull mentions, “ Cultural power reflects how, in the situated realms of everyday life, individuals and groups construct and declare their cultural identities and activities and how those expressions and behaviors influence others,” (72) cultural power is getting more and more powerful in the modern world and the individuals are responsible of carefully managing this power. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the development of individuality in modern culture. As in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt describes the change of human consciousness between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Italy, “ In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness... lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil.

The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation...In Italy this veil first melted into air; an objective treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible.

The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such" (1990: 98). Burckhardt is a historian who attempts to explore the civilization of the Renaissance " in the tracing of a cultural continuum" (Weintraub 117) and gives us a vivid perspective in his detailed analysis. Art and LiteratureThe most crucial influence of the Renaissance in Italy was the development of the individual at any aspects, as Burckhardt expresses, " Wealth and culture, so far as display and rivalry were not forbidden to them, a municipal freedom which did not cease to be considerable, and a Church which, unlike that of the Byzantine or of the Muhammadan world, was not identical with the state - all these conditions undoubtedly favoured the growth of individual thought, for which the necessary leisure was furnished by the cessation of party conflicts" (1990: 99). At that time, it was obvious to see the growth of individuality in the field of art.

The artists of the Renaissance not only " created new and perfect works" but also " made the greatest impression as men" (ibid. : 101) to reveal the talents of those artistic individuals. Famous as his greatest masterpiece The Divine Comedy, for instance, Dante was excellent in representing his extraordinary talent with the consciousness of individuality and he was the person who " strove for the poet's garland with all the power of his soul"

<https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-individuality-in-the-modern-world-essay/>

(104). In addition, Burckhardt also points out that the individuals in the fifteenth century were “ many-sided men” who not only learned the techniques in their own field, but also expanded their vision to have more knowledge in other areas. For example, as he mentions, “ the Florentine merchant and statesman was often learned in both the classical languages” and “ the humanist, on his side, was compelled to the most varied attainments, since his philological learning was not limited, as it is now, to the theoretical knowledge of classical antiquity, but had to serve the practical needs of daily life” (102). Because of the development of the individuals, these many-sided men had the confidence and believed that they were capable of doing everything they wanted.

And they attempted to build up a harmonious and pleasing aesthetic atmosphere in creation. Therefore, the artists and poets were highly encouraged to create their work and besides, they were willing to interact with others as the poet-scholars. As Burckhardt claims, these poet-scholars “ did so in a double sense, being themselves the most acknowledged celebrities of Italy, and at the same time, as poets and historians, consciously disposing of the reputation of others” (105) and so to speak, this situation not only helped the artists increase their fame and reputation, but also enlarged their interaction and communication with others. Furthermore, as Burckhardt describes, “ But wit could not be an independent element in life till its appropriate victim, the developed individual with personal pretensions, had appeared. Its weapons were then by no means limited to the tongue and the pen, but included tricks and practical jokes - the so-called burle and beffe - which form a chief subject of many collections of

novels” (110). The people in the Renaissance became smarter to express their thought in the form of wit and ridicule.

This was the way the Renaissance people used to reveal their capacity of being individuals, whether in fame or in life. Besides, the revival of antiquity was an important condition of the Renaissance. Due to the development of the individual, people expanded the area of learning in thoughts and ancient language such as Latin. As Burckhardt argues, “ There was then, we are told, nobody in Florence who could not read; even the donkey-men sang the verses of Dante; the best Italian manuscripts which we possess belonged originally to Florentine artisans; the publication of a popular encyclopedia, like the Tesoro of Brunetto Latini, was then possible; and all this was founded on a strength and soundness of character due to the universal participation in public affairs, to commerce and travel, and to the systematic reprobation of idleness” (136).

The Renaissance people in Italy not only broadened their vision and had more universities and schools for studying, but also considered the importance of education and “ devoted all their energies to the support of humanism and the protection of the scholars who lived among them” (147). As a result, their “ devotion to antiquity” enabled them to stimulate their creativity and have their own “ free production” (167) with their powerful awareness of individuality. Social LifeThe development of individuality not only greatly influenced art and literature, it also changed the social life of the Renaissance people in Italy. Firstly, the Renaissance people had new attitudes toward the world, as Burckhardt describes, “ Free from the countless bonds which elsewhere in Europe checked progress, having <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-individuality-in-the-modern-world-essay/>

reached a high degree of individual development and been schooled by the teachings of antiquity, the Italian mind now turned to the discovery of the outward universe, and to the representation of it in speech and in form” (185). They began the journeys to distant areas of the world.

Besides, they were more interested in investigating the natural sciences and the beauty of nature. As Burckhardt explains the reason of this situation, “The power to do so is always the result of a long and complicated development, and its origin is not easily detected, since a dim feeling of this kind may exist long before it shows itself in poetry and painting, and thereby becomes conscious of itself,” (192) the people were highly cultivated and recognized that they had to know more about the outside world and others as to know about themselves. In a word, from Burckhardt’s viewpoint, this was a period that “first gave the highest development to individuality, and then led the individual to the most zealous and thorough study of himself in all forms and under all conditions” (198). And he continues to claim, “Indeed, the development of personality is essentially involved in the recognition of it in oneself and in others” (199).

So to speak, this period was an intellectual movement of the Renaissance people. They were awakened by their consciousness of individuality to search deeper and broader meaning of the outside world and of human being. In addition to the new perspectives in realizing the world and mankind, the Renaissance people made their social life full of humanism and equality, as Burckhardt points out, “everywhere there was a human stream flowing from the country into the cities, and some mountain populations seemed born to supply this current” (227) and moreover, as he depicts, “as <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-individuality-in-the-modern-world-essay/>

time went on, the greater the influence of humanism on the Italian mind, the firmer and more widespread became the conviction that birth decides nothing as to the goodness or badness of a man. In the fifteenth century this was the prevailing opinion," (231) the social life of the Renaissance people turned to become more developed and refined. For instance, they recognized their own personality and concerned more about their costumes, personal style, and gesture.

They no longer considered language as a tool of expression, but an important form in their social intercourse. Take Dante for example, as Burckhardt describes his writings, " His work on the Italian language is not only of the utmost importance for the subject itself, but is also the first complete treatise on any modern language. His method and results belong to the history of linguistic science, in which they will always hold a high place" (240). According to Burckhardt, for these Renaissance people, language should fundamentally be " loved, tended and trained to every use" as the basis of their social intercourse. Generally speaking, the social life of the Renaissance was transformed into a specific type of performance in art.

People concerned every details of daily life for their social intercourse and communication. They broadened their world and intended to live in a highly cultivated society. In a sense, this society, as Burckhardt depicts, " was a matter of art" and " had, and rested on, tacit or avowed rules of good sense and propriety, which are the exact reverse of all mere etiquette" (243). For example, " In Florence society was powerfully affected by literature and politics" (245).

People were highly involved in their social events and festivals. The development of individuality led them to reach a society that was intensely and closely connected to other individuals. Religion The development of individuality also influenced the Renaissance people in their opinions of religion. Yet it contained good and bad parts.

As Burckhardt describes, “ The belief in God at earlier times had its source and chief support in Christianity and the outward symbol of Christianity, the Church. When the Church became corrupt, men ought to have drawn a distinction, and kept their religion in spite of all,” (290) the situation of decaying Church caused people to search for other support. And at that time, there were a lot of monks, sermons and preachers in the society. Due to their consciousness of individuality, nevertheless, the Renaissance people became more subjective in their different judgment and attitudes toward religion. Take their attitudes towards the preachers for example, these preachers “ were criticized and ridiculed by a scornful humanism; but when they raised their voices, no one gave heed to the humanists” (297).

Burckhardt discusses their different attitudes toward sermons and preachers, “ Men kept on laughing at the ordinary monkish sermons, with their spurious miracles and manufactured relics; but did not cease to honour the great and genuine preachers. These are a true speciality of the fifteenth century” (298). That means the Renaissance people had their own specific and personal viewpoint on religion. For instance, they were mostly influenced by the preachers, and preferred to “ enter a convent” when they required a resolve their inner violent nature and contradictions. In Burckhardt’s analysis of this situation, “ This resolve was stimulated by their admiration of the holy <https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-individuality-in-the-modern-world-essay/>

man, and by the desire to copy at least his outward position," (299) the preachers attempted to help people reconcile enemies and persuade them to get rid of their thoughts of revenge (ibid. .

In addition to the following of the preachers, the Renaissance people also had great adoration of the Madonna as their attitudes towards Mariolatry. As Burckhardt describes, " In Italy, however, the number of miraculous pictures of the Virgin was far greater, and the part they played in the daily life of the people much more important...The popular craving for the miraculous, especially strong in women, may have been fully satisfied by these pictures, and for this reason the relics been less regarded" (308-309). Actually this attitude was somehow specific and extraordinary in Italy. In a sense, that period was a period of " religious indifference" (315).

For the Renaissance people, on the one hand, the adoration could be expressed not an absolute and exclusive Christian faith but an " indirect evidence of an early development of the aesthetic sense" (308) and their worship to saints was also related to their own imagination and the pagan forms, such as they were still interested in the revival of the Crusades and the Flagellant and antiquity. As Burckhardt considers, these " close and frequent relations of Italy with Byzantium and the Muhammadan" people had their own distinctive attitudes and they produced " a dispassionate tolerance which weakened the ethnographical conception of a privileged Christendom" (312). So to speak, the development of individuality led them to know more about religion as in art and social life. However, " their powerful individuality made them in religion, as in other matters, altogether subjective, and the intense charm which the discovery of the inner and outer niverse exercised

<https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-individuality-in-the-modern-world-essay/>

upon them rendered them markedly worldly” (ibid. ). In a sense, the Renaissance people were more flexible in tolerating the religious variety.

Therefore, religion for them became “ an affair of the individual and of his own personal feeling was inevitable when the Church became corrupt in doctrine and tyrannous in practice, and is a proof that the European mind was still alive” (313). As Burckhardt expresses, “ each individual in Italy went his own way, and thousands wandered on the sea of life without any religious guidance whatever” (ibid. ) and this attitude of worldliness that the Renaissance people differentiated from the people in the Middle Ages, “ was not frivolous, but earnest, and was ennobled by art and poetry” (314). In a sense, the Renaissance people did not seriously consider the necessary differences between Christianity, Muhammadan, and other types of religion. It was their consciousness of individuality that not only led them to allow their religious indifference, but also led them to rather believe in their own “ freedom of the will” (317).

As Burckhardt comments on the humanism of the Renaissance, “ This humanism was in fact pagan, and became more and more so as its sphere widened in the fifteenth century. Its representatives...display as a rule such a character that even their religion, which is sometimes professed very definitely, becomes a matter of indifference to us. They easily got the name of atheists, if they showed themselves indifferent to religion, and spoke freely against the Church; but not one of them ever professed, or dared to profess, a formal, philosophical atheism” (319). This situation obviously expressed how the Renaissance people created their particular attitudes toward different religions as the good parts of the influence in their religious

<https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-individuality-in-the-modern-world-essay/>

attitudes. Nevertheless, their consciousness of individuality in the revival of antiquity also brought them to the bad influence.

Due to their fantasy in the revival of antiquity and in believing the immortality, the Renaissance people were deeply indulged in the superstition and fatalism. As Burckhardt claims that “ all Europe, through the latter part of the Middle Ages, had allowed itself to be terrified by predictions of plagues, wars, floods and earthquakes, and in this respect Italy was by no means behind other countries,” (327) the Renaissance people took astrology and magic as the necessary doctrines of the guidelines of their daily life. However, Burckhardt concerns that as the doctrines “ ended by simply darkening men’s whole perceptions of spiritual things” (ibid. ).

From Burckhardt’s viewpoint, the bad influence of this belief of superstition, whether in astrology or in magic, was that possibility of leading people “ to enter into relations with the evil ones, and use their help to further the purposes of greed, ambition and sensuality” (333). And that was the negative and dangerous impact of the development of individuality for the whole society in Italy. However, as Burckhardt finally expresses his own opinion of the development of individuality of the Renaissance in Italy, “ While the men of the Middle Ages look on the world as a vale of tears, which pope and emperor are set to guard against the coming of antichrist; while the fatalists of the Renaissance oscillate between seasons of overflowing energy and seasons of superstition or of stupid resignation, here, in this circle of chosen spirits, the doctrine is upheld that the visible world was created by God in love, that it is the copy of a pattern pre-existing in Him, and that He will ever remain its eternal mover and restorer. The soul of man

<https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-individuality-in-the-modern-world-essay/>

can be recognizing God draw Him into its narrow boundaries, but also by love of Him itself expand into the Infinite - and this is blessedness on earth" (350-351). It is Burckhardt's view of the situation of religion at that time.

Yet the important point is that, the Renaissance people did reveal their own individual standard in discovering and understanding the whole universe, including religion, art, social life and themselves, whether they chose to open their mind and accept the religious variety or they chose to believe the power of superstition and astrology. No matter how much the development of individuality had good or bad influences on the whole society of the Renaissance, at least, that was true individuality of the Renaissance people.

Conclusion In The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, Burckhardt gives us a new perspective of cultural history. He attempts to portray the Renaissance as a particular creation of human world in order to understand how the consciousness of individuality arose at that time. As Weintraub claims that the responsibility of the historian, " The historian of a civilization is interested in the total way of life, in the style of life by which men gave unified expression to their manifold activities. He pursues that elusive collective individuality in which distinctive human groups have worked out their specific human form" (2).

Burckhardt attempts to provide " the picture of a particular period of the past, of a geographically and chronologically separate section of European history," as in History: Politics or Culture? Feliz Gilbert comments on Burckhardt's The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, " The Renaissance stands by itself like a painting on an easel" (57). Burckhardt concentrates on the consciousness of individuality and concerns it the main and necessary

<https://assignbuster.com/the-development-of-individuality-in-the-modern-world-essay/>

element in his view of the Renaissance. As a matter of fact, Burckhardt chooses not to use the traditional method to describe the details of history but considers it as an individual work of human art. Gilbert also argues, “ Burckhardt’s book is a description of the transformation brought about by the new awareness of individuality - of the changes in attitudes, concerns, and forms of social life determined by the discovery of ‘ the individual’,” (59) and the Renaissance was not only considered by Burckhardt as “ one of the great ages that enlightened us about the facilities of man and showed us what man’s abilities could achieve” but also was concerned by Burckhardt to unfold “ the dangers inherent in the unrestricted use of man’s capacities” (67-68).

Indeed, it is undeniable that Burckhardt leads us to see the phenomenon of a higher culture in his analysis of the Renaissance. In a word, as Weintraub claims, “ Life as harmony is life as style; it is a balancing of components, each of which may be in tension with another. In the Renaissance work Burckhardt was concerned with the factors which permitted a style of life in quattrocento Italy and with the forms used to express this co-ordinated diversity” (143). Burckhardt leads us to see the development of individuality in his specific vision of cultural history in the modern world.

References: Burckhardt, Jacob. (1990) *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Trans. S.

G. C. Middlemore. London: Penguin.

Burckhardt, Jacob. (1943) *Reflections on History*. Trans. M.

D. H. London: George Allen & Unwin. Gilbert, Felix.

(1990) History: Politics or Culture? Princeton: Princeton University Press. Lull,

James. (1995) Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach.

Cambridge: Polity Press. Riesman, David.

(1954) Individualism Reconsidered. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Weintraub, Karl J. (1966) Visions of Culture.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.