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2. The Renaissance of Northern Europe

Abstract

The Renaissance north of the Alps was akin to the Italian Renaissance, but it appeared later and developed distinctive features of its own. It had a dual origin in infection and invention. Infection was the result of the brisk traffic of merchants, scholars, princes, soldiers, Churchmen, and artists which passed between Italy and the North, carrying tidings of the new developments in Rome, Florence, Venice, and Milan. In addition, northern Europeans hit on ideas of their own. Since they, like the Italians, were experiencing the growth of trade, urban life, and the centralized state, their response to these events was related to that of the Italians under similar conditions. However, Frenchmen, Germans, Netherlanders, and Englishmen worked with native materials and therefore did not reproduce the Italian scene exactly. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Northern Europe, Renaissance, Capitalism, Economic Growth, City-State

Disciplines

Cultural History | Economic History | European History | History

Comments

This is a part of [Section VI: Renaissance Humanism](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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2. The Renaissance in Northern Europe

The Renaissance north of the Alps was akin to the Italian Renaissance, but it appeared later and developed distinctive features of its own. It had a dual origin in infection and invention. Infection was the result of the brisk traffic of merchants, scholars, princes, soldiers, Churchmen, and artists which passed between Italy and the North, carrying tidings of the new developments in Rome, Florence, Venice, and Milan. In addition, northern Europeans hit on ideas of their own. Since they, like the Italians, were experiencing the growth of trade, urban life, and the centralized state, their response to these events was related to that of the Italians under similar conditions. However, Frenchmen, Germans, Netherlanders, and Englishmen worked with native materials and therefore did not reproduce the Italian scene exactly.

Difference of North from Italy

Not until the second half of the fifteenth century was the Renaissance under way in the North. It took time to digest the rich diet of Italian Renaissance culture. Moreover, in the North feudalism was more deeply rooted and trade revived more gradually. Cities grew slowly, were widely scattered, and did not dominate the scene to the same extent as in Italy. Nor was there, as in Italy, an overlapping of noble and burgher. As has already been shown, the centralized government developed by many of the New Monarchies of the North was that of a national, not a city, state. The feudal aristocracy long retained its identity, its peculiar political aspirations, and its chivalric code. Meanwhile, the burghers of the new urban centers developed an outlook of their own. A number of the Northern humanists sprang from this class and never lost the impress of its practical and ethical point of view.

While lay civilization in the North failed to establish a united front between burgher and noble, religion remained firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of both the lettered and the unlettered. For this and other reasons, the Northern Renaissance was conservative. Whereas in Italy the tradition of Christian civilization had to compete with a parallel and older pagan tradition, in the North civilization and Christianity were virtually synonymous. Their separation was unthinkable. There were few remains of a highly developed pre-Christian civilization in the arts or in speculative thought. The universities, which dominated intellectual life, long remained strongholds of the scholastic philosophy which had developed there. Devotion to religion was widespread in all classes. Everywhere pious burghers were enlarging ecclesiastical edifices, or rebuilding them on a more lavish scale. The very frequency with which they grumbled about abuses in the Church indicated that they thought her mission was important.

This question of ecclesiastical abuses leads to another characteristic of the Northern Renaissance, its practical concern for reform. The Renaissance Italian was apt to take the world as he found it, perhaps lacking in order and decency but nonetheless interesting and potentially pleasurable. The Northerner lived in a world in which the new and the medieval rubbed elbows, (often with considerable friction). Men were perplexed by what was going on, understanding only that the times were out of joint. Consequently, practical questions of reform were hard to avoid.

We have now seen that the Northern Renaissance was slow in flowering, less aristocratic than in Italy, conservative in tone, strongly religious, and practical in its emphasis. These distinctive characteristics stand out in the lives and works of the Northern humanists. The first generation of Northern humanists, those flourishing in the second half of the fifteenth century, were primarily teachers, who made few original contributions. It was they who passed on the New Learning which they had acquired in Italy. Such a person was Rudolf Agricola (1442-1485), who returned to his native Germany to translate Greek

*Much more broad spectrum of people (townsmen)
middle class - more emphasizing emphasis on moral conduct
write for the educated class the townspeople.*

classics and write pedagogical treatises. At first the older universities were bitter foes of these returning scholars, who in their turn showed little restraint in attacking established curricula. Generally the New Learning enjoyed a better reception in the cities where the middle class was less committed to the traditional university program.

Moreover, the wealthy burghers had the resources with which to subsidize scholars. Much of the credit for spreading the New Learning must go to the new grammar schools founded by the townsmen to teach their sons the rudiments of Latin and sometimes even Greek, thereby helping to create a literate middle class. New, and therefore less tradition-bound, universities were established, often by secular authorities. Between 1450 and 1517 nine were opened in Germany, three in France, and seven in Spain. Ultimately the humanists secured chairs even at the older centers of learning.

The efforts of humanists everywhere to publicize their point of view were greatly facilitated by a revolution in the art of printing. The technique of making paper had been brought to Europe, probably from China by the Arabs, during the High Middle Ages. Printing from wooden blocks began about the same time. At first it was limited to the reproduction of crude pictures, to which a few lines of text were added. Soon, short pamphlets were being printed, with one block used for each page. However, this method was expensive and laborious. It was probably a German, Johann Gutenberg (c. 1400 - c. 1468) of Mainz, who, sometime between 1440 and 1450, invented a type-casting process that made possible printing from movable metal type. The famous Gutenberg Bible dates from 1457. By the end of the century there were 73 presses in Italy, 51 in Germany, 39 in France, 24 in Spain, 15 in the Low Countries, and 8 in Switzerland. The speed with which the new technique spread proved that the times were ripe for its introduction. There was a large reading public; there was capital for investment; and there were individuals prepared to venture into a new business.

The effects of this development on subsequent history are incalculable. To contemporary humanists printing offered a vehicle for reaching a wide audience. In the words of a German humanist (Jakob Wimpheling), "as the apostles of Christ formerly went through the world announcing the good news, so in our days the disciples of the new art [of printing] spread themselves through all countries and their books are the heralds of the Gospel and the preachers of truth and science." Cheapness was not the least of the advantages of the printed book over the handwritten manuscript. Moreover, for the first time scholars had access to standardized versions of an author's work, free of copyists' errors. The work of scholarship was immensely facilitated by the possibility of making references to a particular edition, exact copies of which were widely available. Many of the new publishing houses became centers of learning. The Aldine Press at Venice printed the Greek classics with a dedication which went beyond profit-making. The great Erasmus, of

Christians out look. Hebrew to read original O.T.

whom more later, served as editor of a publishing house.

The full flowering of Northern humanism began about 1490 and lasted until about 1520. A second generation of humanists, building on the work of their predecessors, now rivaled in importance their Italian contemporaries. Generally they were what are called Christian humanists. Christian humanists shared with other humanists a common reverence for classical antiquity and a common contempt for medieval scholarship. They much preferred the clarity and elegance of the ancient Latin writers to the corrupt Latin of the Middle Ages. They found in the classics a sane attitude toward this world, beside which the medieval theologians seemed superstitious and eccentric. Nevertheless, being moderate men, they never permitted their admiration for Greek and Roman Civilization to blind them to the importance of the Scriptures and the early Church fathers. Rather, they looked upon the New Learning as a practical tool for the understanding of true religion which, they believed, had become encrusted and obscured by allegory, superstition, and error. They were confident that the same critical techniques which were useful in the study of the pagan classics could be applied to the early Christian classics, where they expected to find pure and simple what Erasmus called the philosophy of Christ, (a guide to life that would be at once rational, moral, and ethical). Although their techniques were scholarly, their moral emphasis fitted the aspirations of burgher piety. In their search they eschewed medieval commentaries and other such late secondary sources, going instead to the basic documents of the Christian faith in the original Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Nor did they see any incompatibility between Christianity and the pagan learning of ancient Greece and Rome. All learning, they felt, whether concerned with revelation or nature, could only purify; it could not corrupt. This was not an original idea, but the Christian humanists gave it a new emphasis. These studies aroused the violent opposition of conservative theologians suspicious of novelty, but the Christian humanists had no intention of breaking with the Church. If they showed little reverence for many of her practices and traditions, it was because they wanted desperately to cleanse her, not to destroy her.

Virtually every country in Northern Europe added honored names to the list of Christian humanists. In Germany, Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) became the great Christian master of Hebrew, a language avoided by medieval scholars with pious horror. In France, Jacques Le Fevre (1455-1535) issued an edition of the Pauline Epistles, revised on the basis of early Greek versions; translated the New Testament into French; and supported the efforts of humanist clergymen to revive spiritual life through a purified Church. In England, the company of humanist clerics and scholars was joined by a lawyer, Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), who attained eminence in both politics and, more lastingly, letters.

The son of a prosperous London jurist, More was educated at Oxford where he began his friendship with a number of leading

humanists. Although he abandoned his early intention to enter the Church in favor of a legal career, he remained a devout man who always wore a hair shirt next to his skin. In his chosen profession he won the respect of the young king, Henry VIII, who himself dabbled in the New Learning. In 1523 More became speaker of the House of Commons and in 1529, lord chancellor. Such prominence was precarious and dangerous under a king who needed no instruction from Machiavelli on the exercise of power. Although More criticized certain aspects of the Church, he refused to accept the king as "Supreme Head of the Church of England" in place of the pope when Henry established a separate English church. This refusal led to his trial for treason, and the block. The Roman Catholic church canonized him in 1935.

It was in 1515, while serving on a diplomatic mission to Flanders, that More wrote the first part of his most famous book, Utopia. He completed it the next year. The popularity of the original Latin edition was attested by the speed with which it was translated into French, Italian, German, and English. The book reproduces an imaginary conversation between the author and a mariner who had just returned from a mythical island kingdom, Utopia (the Greek word for "nowhere"). In Europe the mariner claims he finds life less well regulated than in Utopia. He is distressed by the severity of the law, and suggests that it is better to prevent crime by finding work for the poor than to punish them severely for the crimes to which poverty drives them. He finds depopulation and destitution in the countryside because of the enclosure movement, from which even churchmen design to profit. He sees numerous idle wealthy men, each surrounded by worthless courtiers and servants equally idle. He condemns the lavishness of dress. He notes that princes prefer ruinous warfare to ruling their subjects justly. He protests against the dishonesty of diplomacy and the oppressive taxes borne by the poor. He then contrasts these and other contemporary shortcomings with the very different conditions in Utopia, "that excellent perfection in all good fashions, humanity, and civil gentleness wherein they [the Utopians] now go beyond all the people of the world."¹

The government of Utopia is headed by a prince, chosen for life by secret ballot by the elected representatives of the people, "unless he be deposed or put down for suspicion of tyranny." The powers of both prince and parliament are circumscribed by constitutional provisions designed to secure popular liberty and maintain the rule of law. Officials are chosen for their learning, live simply, and glory in the title of "father." Laws are few in number so that all may comprehend them. There are no lawyers to obstruct justice with complicated arguments. Local government subdivisions, based also on a system of elections, are neat, rational, and uniform. At the base of the body politic is the household, numbering about forty individuals and

1 - This and other quotations from the Utopia (with spelling modernized) are taken from the edition in Maynard's English Classic series (New York: Maynard, Merrill, & Co., 1895), (passim.

Democratic. Everyone has his place (less aristocratic) within the upper class. concern for ways of life.

presided over by the eldest male. Each household has two "bondsmen." Some of the latter are criminals condemned to death abroad and purchased by the Utopians. Others, Utopians who committed heinous offenses, are granted their freedom if they show repentance. Yet others are foreign volunteers attracted by life in Utopia, who may leave at will.

In a very literal sense Utopia is a commonwealth, without private property. "And though no man has any thing, yet every man is rich." Goods are kept in community storehouses from which each man takes what he needs, "without money, without exchange, without any gage, pawn, or pledge." No one takes more than he needs because he knows that there is always more for the asking. By abolishing fear of want, covetousness is destroyed and with it a principal cause of evil. Crime is further discouraged by punishments, which are proportionate to the gravity of the offense, and by rewards to virtue.

Plenty is assured by a planned economy more efficient and just than a competitive system. Laborers are free to rotate between rural and urban jobs. No one works more than nine hours a day, but because there is no class of idlers, and because no one is forced to remain long at some drudgery, production is higher than in Europe. Many menial and degrading tasks are performed by the bondsmen. It is they, for example, who staff the slaughterhouses because Utopians feel that such work makes citizens insensitive to suffering.

Since there is no need for money, gold is valued less than iron. To publicize its worthlessness, it is used to chain criminals and for common household utensils. Infants use precious stones for playthings. Owing to the backwardness of their neighbors, however, the Utopians employ gold in international relations to bribe enemy leaders and to hire assassins and mercenary troops. They see no glory in warfare and go to great lengths to avoid it. However, they are not pacifists. If a Utopian city is overpopulated, the surplus population is sent to colonize unused lands beyond the border. If the neighbors protest, the Utopians will fight because they deem it a great crime not to use the resources supplied by a bountiful nature. They will also fight to protect themselves from invasion and to liberate their neighbors from the rule of tyrants. They avoid leagues and alliances because they feel that love of fellowmen is the only lasting bond between states. Truces they observe scrupulously. Their treatment of the vanquished is lenient.

The cities of Utopia show the same planning as economic life. Each is kept to a manageable size, with broad streets and pleasant gardens. Every ten years the citizens exchange houses. In each ward of the city is a large hall where the citizens eat in a common dining room. It is permissible to prepare one's food at home, but generally the common table is preferred because the food there is prepared by skilled specialists. Hospitals are established near each city to care for the

Humanist revised study of Plato. Points out the things which he thought ought to be changed. Man in the world with a soul.

infirm. If a person suffers from an incurable disease, the magistrates and priests encourage -- but do not order -- him to seek relief in a quick and painless death.

The spare time of the citizens is given over to any pleasure "whereof cometh no harm." Hunting, gambling, idling at taverns, and travel without permission of the magistrates are all forbidden. Ostentation in dress is outlawed by provisions that clothes should be made of undyed cloth and cut from a common pattern, save only for distinction in the clothes of male and female and of married and the unmarried.

The chief pleasure of the citizens is in the improvement of the mind, "for herein they suppose the felicity of this life to consist." Attendance at lectures and concerts is general, but not compulsory. Even games are used to teach virtue, which they define as a "life ordered according to the precepts of nature." Education is available to all, and scholars are exempt from many menial tasks. They show great skill in astronomy, mathematics, and logic, but scorn astrology and scholastic philosophy. When foreign visitors taught them Greek, they soon mastered the classics, which they much admired. In Latin they showed little interest.

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Posterity has interpreted Utopia in various ways. To some, it is the reflection of the contemporary interest in Plato. To others, it is merely a pleasant fable, written to amuse the learned. Some see in the campuslike community of Utopia a re-statement of medieval corporate ideas of monastery, manor, and guild. Others insist it is a blueprint for the future. Yet others regard it as a reflection of middle-class demands for reform. And some consider it "a strictly rational philosophic construction, minus Christianity, for the purpose of moral instruction." All would agree that it is very much the product of its age, the first of a long line of modern Utopias.

It is fitting to conclude a discussion of Christian humanism with Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536), the "prince of humanists." A true European, as cosmopolitan as the studies in which he excelled, he was born in the Netherlands, studied in Paris, taught at Cambridge, visited Rome, and finally settled in Switzerland. A list of his friends and acquaintances, with whom he carried on a voluminous correspondence, would include a large proportion of the important figures of his day. His early life was spent in a monastery, which he found so uncongenial that he secured a dispensation from his monastic vows. In the outside world he devoted himself to the New Learning as publicist and scholar. No closet philosopher, he was uniquely able to communicate his enthusiasm for the classics trenchantly and charmingly. "If there is any fresh Greek to be had," he wrote, "I had rather pawn my coat than not get it, especially if it is something Christian, as the Psalms in Greek or the Gospels." As scholar his greatest achievement was his Greek New Testament, published with a Latin translation in 1516, which criticized the official text of the Vulgate on a number of points.

Reform in religion, society, & government.

The orthodox were equally discomfited when he turned his critical powers from classical studies to contemporary manners, morals, and institutions. But, although his pen was sharp in its attacks on human frailty, he never doubted that ignorance and stupidity could be vanquished by education and knowledge.

However, his last years were darkened by the religious controversy which tended to submerge the Christian humanists. Catholics suspected him of heresy, claiming that "Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it." Nevertheless one pope, hoping to secure the services of so potentially valuable an ally, offered him a cardinal's hat. Erasmus declined the honor. The early Protestant reformers found in the works of Erasmus ammunition for their salvoes against clerical abuse, and he in turn hoped at first for much from their efforts at reform. But, when the extent of their differences with Catholicism became clear, and particularly after they broke with Rome, he recoiled in horror from "that wretched Luther." Always the moderate, however misunderstood, Erasmus the rationalist was repelled by the passions engendered by the Reformation.

It was in 1511, on the eve of the Reformation, that Erasmus wrote his famous satire, The Praise of Folly. At the time he was staying with his good friend, Sir Thomas More. The book purports to be a discourse delivered by Folly, depicted as a handsome young woman wearing the gown of a learned professor and the fool's cap of a jester. In the portion given below the reader can taste the writer's literary style while noting the objects of his derision.

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Like Italy, Northern Europe also witnessed a flowering of vernacular literature in the Renaissance. The works of three men, covering between them the time span of the period, may be taken as illustrative of this development. Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400) stands on the threshold of the Northern Renaissance. An English civil servant, he visited Italy where he may have met his contemporary, Petrarch. The stories of his Canterbury Tales, as told by pilgrims on the way to the famous shrine of St. Thomas a Becket, depict life humanely and clearly, and with a humor which is often ribald. In this and other works Chaucer went far toward fixing the form of literary English.

In 1532, Francois Rabelais (c. 1495-1553), a renegade French monk and medical student, finished The Inestimable Life of the Giant Gargantua, Father of Pantagruel. This remarkable account of a legendary giant attacks sham and repression in the vigorous language of the bourgeoisie. A typical section describes a new type of coeducational monastery whose motto is: "Do what thou wilt." There, amid luxurious apartments and pleasure gardens, the fortunate inmates taste the pleasures of mind and body. Rabelais' lust for life and knowledge can fittingly be described as gargantuan.

To comment briefly to an English-speaking audience on the

* Desiderius Erasmus, The Praise of Folly, trans. Hoyt Hopewell Hudson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 7-8, 40-43, 53-54, 56-57, 68-70, 73-74, 76-79, 85-87, 93-101, 125. Used with permission of the copyright owner, Princeton University Press.

work of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is to give both too much and too little. It must suffice to remind the reader of the sure touch of genius with which the playwright explored human personality and experience, uniquely combining the particular and the universal.

Like literature, the visual arts of the North reflected much of the new world outlook, often under Italian influence. Francis I (1515-1547) of France and his courtiers brought back from their Italian campaigns architects and artists (among them the great Leonardo) to design and embellish their palaces. These chateaux, built more for comfort than defense, illustrate the transition from castle to mansion, the refinement of manners, the size of private fortunes, and the triumph of gunpowder over medieval fortifications. Here the influence of Renaissance classicism was apparent, but the architecture of Germany and England shows this influence only sporadically until the seventeenth century. Yet even in distant Moscow buildings in the Kremlin were remodeled by Italian architects.

Although painting in the North was influenced by Italian developments, it retained elements of the native tradition of Gothic art. The brooding, often pessimistic, flavor of many Northern works had few counterparts in Italy. The same can be said of the Northern addiction for the monstrous and the supernatural, for deformed dwarfs and imaginary beings. In the wealthy towns of Flanders a remarkable school of artists, most notably Peter Breughel (c. 1525-1569), depicted scenes of peasant life with a Rabelaisian naturalism which was distinctively Northern. The works of two German portrait painters, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) and Hans Holbein (c. 1497-1543), reflect the Italian concern for the portrayal of character, but soberly and even somberly. With a breadth of interest comparable to Leonardo, Dürer collected tropical animals, wrote books on fortification and perspective, and turned out matchless engravings and woodcuts whose popular sale made him the first "best-seller" among artists. In the second half of the sixteenth century much of the painting of the North degenerated into slavish and showy imitation of Italian models.

To say when the Renaissance ended is as difficult as was the dating of its birth. One of the great authorities on the subject puts it this way:

...as the Renaissance began when the new cultural forces commenced to weigh down the balance against the old, it may be said to have ended when the swing of the balance had reached a decisive point. According to a generally accepted convention, which fits most of the facts, that point was reached about the end of the sixteenth century. *

* Wallace K. Ferguson, The Renaissance (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1940), p. 132.

By then most of the characteristic features of the Renaissance had been cut short, or atrophied, or were so widely accepted as to be no longer novel.

This acceptance of portions of Renaissance civilization means that in a sense the Renaissance still lives on in the West. There are today statesmen and businessmen who are the heirs of the statecraft and the capitalism of the Renaissance. The impetus the Renaissance gave to the growth of individualism, humanism (in its broad meaning), and secularism was to have far-reaching results. The Greek and Latin classics which it had glorified were to continue for centuries to influence the thought of educated men, whose education bore the stamp of humanist theories. Vernacular literatures were to flourish luxuriantly. Renaissance art and architecture were to inspire the eyes and hands of future generations of artists and architects. Indirectly Renaissance humanists encouraged the subsequent growth of the natural sciences by recovering ancient scientific learning, by developing a critical approach and secular interests, and by furthering lay education. Finally, the Renaissance contributed in ways that will be discussed later to the origin and development of the Protestant Reformation.