

An Appraisal of Baron's Thesis

Danny Loss

Hans Baron has been called the 20th century's answer to Jacob Burckhardt. Coming from a scholar as respected as John Najemy, this is high praise indeed. It should come as no surprise, then, that Baron's best-known work, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, "provoked more discussion and inspired more research than any other scholarly book on the Italian Renaissance of the 20th century."¹ Just as with Burckhardt, not all of that discussion has been laudatory, nor all of that research corroborative. Baron's thesis on civic humanism has been critiqued from a variety of angles since its formulation, yet it also continues to have its defenders. It seems clear, however, that Baron's thesis, if it is to be retained at all, requires substantial modification.

Baron's thesis involved several components. First (and this is key, as it is presupposed for the second component of his argument), he observed a drastic change from the mediievally inflected humanism of the Trecento to the more republican-minded civic humanism that characterized the Quattrocento, especially in Florence. In particular, Baron argued that early humanists were incapable of breaking free from the mindset that fused theology and the defense of monarchy; the civic humanism of the Quattrocento, first seen in the work of Leonardo Bruni, abandoned this paradigm and articulated a new ideal of republicanism and civic life that reflected contemporary Florentine politics. Second, Baron claimed that this new form of humanism was triggered by the threat of despotism overrunning republicanism in the guise of Giangaleazzo Visconti of Milan conquering much of northern Italy. Baron contended that the conflict between Florence and Milan, seen by Florentines as a battle between republicanism and despotism, strengthened republican forms and sentiment in Florence and triggered Bruni's expressions of a

¹ Ronald Witt, "The Crisis after Forty Years," *American Historical Review* 101, no. 1 (1996): 111.

new republican ideal. Finally, Baron argued that the foundations of modern conceptions of democratic polity can be traced back to the civic humanism first expressed by Bruni.² All three of these claims have been subjected to close scrutiny, the major themes of which are explored below.

The idea that 15th century humanism was fundamentally concerned with republicanism and was therefore a new phenomenon has been attacked from several viewpoints. First is Baron's claim that Bruni was the first to express republican sentiment in late medieval Italy. James Blythe cited a number of historians who have shown that "there was extensive appreciation of the Roman Republic before Bruni, and even before Petrarch." Perhaps the best known of these pre-Bruni writers was Ptolemy of Lucca. Ptolemy has been described as "capable of providing a coherent critique of the Empire in terms of the decline of virtue and the incompatibility of any monarchy with the needs of any 'virile and virtuous people.'" In other words, thinkers before Bruni had already criticized monarchy and defended republicanism, thus belying Baron's claim to the novelty of Bruni's ideas. Blythe also showed that defense of monarchy and the Empire during the medieval period was not exclusively couched in the theological terms Baron proposed, thus disproving Baron's argument that only with civic humanism did secular history begin to matter in political thought.³

Baron, careful scholar that he was, admitted that humanistic expressions of republican sentiment did exist before the Florence-Milan crisis. Rather than ignoring the writings of Ptolemy of Lucca, Baron insisted that no matter "how clearly the republican and constitutional ideals of the Tuscan communes had been expressed by Ptolemy, a new... depreciation... of the *Imperium Romanum* is lacking in his *De Regimine Principum*." Along similar lines, Witt downplayed the

² Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, Revised ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 6-11, 444-62.

³ James M. Blythe, "'Civic Humanism' and Medieval Political Thought," in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36, 42.

influence of Ptolemy of Lucca and other writers who had expressed republican ideals prior to Bruni. He admitted that it seemed necessary to redefine Bruni's uniqueness from "the first in Western European history to articulate an integrated theory of republicanism... [to] the first to develop in true humanist fashion a theory of republicanism set in historical perspective, together with a civic ethic embodying the theory as a way of life."⁴ While this careful reformulation seems quite plausible, it is a far cry from the dramatic change in humanism and political thought from the Trecento to the Quattrocento described by Baron.⁵ While Bruni's did articulate an ideology that can be classified as civic humanism, the republican strains in Ptolemy of Lucca's writing contradict Baron's claim that Bruni was the first republican humanist.

There are those who have argued, however, that Bruni's political beliefs were far from consistent, that the civic humanism proposed by Baron never even existed in the mind of its putative chief proponent. The chief support for this position lies in the apparent shifting of Bruni's political loyalties. How devoted to republicanism could Bruni be if he later supported the Medicean regime in Florence and even entered the service of the papacy? James Hankins, in articulating this position, echoed Paul Oskar Kristeller's conception of humanists as professional rhetoricians, arguing that the content of Bruni's writing was meant to satisfy the demands of his employers and should not be seen as an expression of his own political beliefs.⁶ In response, Witt claimed that Bruni's apparent lack of devotion to republicanism, besides being overstated, is irrelevant to Baron's thesis; Bruni's personal beliefs were not significant in of themselves. What mattered was how his writings were perceived in Florence. Witt cited Gene Brucker's finding that

⁴ Baron, *Crisis*, 57, Witt, "The Crisis after Forty Years," 114.

⁵ Hankins disagrees, arguing that civic humanism should not be considered an exclusively republican program, but should rather be seen as an attempt "at the reform of political communities... by improving the moral behavior of their ruling elites," and therefore a program that could take place in despotisms as well as republics. See James Hankins, "The 'Baron Thesis' after Forty Years, and Some Recent Studies of Leonardo Bruni," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 2 (1995): 330.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 325-27.

Florentine politicians “conceptualiz[ed] their positions in terms similar to those” expressed in Bruni’s *Panegyric to the City of Florence* soon after its publication to show that Bruni’s conception of republicanism was widely accepted among the Florentine political class.⁷

Lauro Martines provided a convincing argument for why this should be the case. Pointing out that humanists came from and were employed by the ruling class of Florence, Martines demonstrated that it should come as no surprise that their work should find acceptance in that very class.⁸ Civic humanism helped propagate the illusion that Florentine government was still representative of all citizens of the republic. Najemy showed that, in fact, Florentine politics after 1382 followed two main trends: an expansion of the number of citizens eligible for political office and a contraction of the oligarchic elite who held actual power. In other words, the Florentine government sought to create an image of diffuse political power while actually concentrating real power in the hands of the few. Najemy was careful to point out that these developments were not in opposition but rather supported each other; non-elite members of the citizenry became increasingly passive and willing to concede power to the elite in exchange for the opportunity to hold political office.⁹ Thus, there was a peaceful coexistence of consensus politics and elitism. Witt used this evidence to argue against claims of Bruni’s disloyalty to republicanism, but the more important conclusion to be drawn here is that the civic humanism of Bruni was marshaled in support of oligarchy, not to ensure the equality of all citizens that is superficially evident in Bruni’s work. By coupling a notion of political participation with a responsibility to be loyal to the government, Bruni’s political writings functioned as an implicit defense of oligarchy. In fact,

⁷ Witt, "The Crisis after Forty Years," 116-17.

⁸ Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy*, Johns Hopkins ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 191-217, Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, 1390-1460* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 264-65.

⁹ John Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 303-04.

as Mark Jurdjevic demonstrated, civic humanism was used to justify the Medici rise to power in Florence. Civic humanism encompassed “discussions about the ideal of the scholar-statesman, wealth, and the characteristics of and effects of ideal government.” As Cosimo de’ Medici was able to portray himself as representing those principles, civic humanism effectively strengthened his rule of Florence.¹⁰ Civic humanism, then, was not an exclusively republican program, as Baron argued.

It seems, therefore, that the first component of Baron’s thesis requires substantial revision. Civic humanism did not originate in Florence in the early 15th century, and the civic humanism that was present in Florence at that time was more of an idealized illusion of government than a reflection of the true workings of contemporary Florentine politics.

Discussion of the second component of Baron’s thesis (that which claims that civic humanism was triggered by the threat of posed by the despotic regime of Giangaleazzo Visconti in Milan) presupposed the validity of the first; if there was no such thing as a new form of humanism in the Quattrocento, there is no need to explain its emergence. Some scholars have accepted the core of Baron’s first claim but sought alternate causes. As discussed by Alfred Rabil, Jerrold Seigel sought to discredit Baron’s claim of the Milan crisis as the trigger of civic humanism by disagreeing with Baron’s dating of several works key to Baron’s thesis, namely Bruni’s *Panegyric* and *Dialogues*. If, Seigel argued, these works predate the crisis with Milan, it is absurd to point to

¹⁰ Mark Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1999): 994-1020.

that crisis as the trigger for ideas contained in those writings.¹¹ More recent scholarship has shown Baron's dating of these works to after the Milan crisis to be correct.¹²

Yet that the development of civic humanism occurred after the Milan crisis does not show that the latter caused the former. A number of other causes for the rise of civic humanism have been proposed. The majority of these reject Baron's search for an external cause and instead look to the internal workings of Florence to find the trigger for civic humanism. Marvin Becker pointed to political and economic developments internal to Florence, in particular "the burgeoning of the territorial state and closer supervision of public life... [accompanied by] hundreds of additional civil servants," to account for an ideology that praised the state and civic participation.¹³ As mentioned above, Martines highlighted the shift towards oligarchic government after 1382 and the ruling-class origins of humanists to explain the rise of an ideology that exalted loyalty to the state. Even Witt, Baron's most vociferous defender of recent years, proposed an account of the rise of civic humanism that differs considerably from that of Baron. According to Witt, civic humanism was "closely associated with a revolt against Petrarchan eclecticism in the name of recovering what Poggio refers to as *vetustas*, the flavor of ancient style." He went on to argue that language evocative of Cicero "itself exercised a formative and clarifying role in the generation of the ideas [of civic humanism]...."¹⁴ It seems, therefore, that civic humanism sprung from multiple

¹¹ Arthur Rabil, Jr., "The Significance of Civic Humanism," in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, ed. Arthur Jr. Rabil (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 153-54, Jerrold E. Seigel, "'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni," *Past and Present* 34 (1966): 3-48. Actually, as Rabil points out, Seigel was most concerned with proving that there was no such thing as civic humanism. The dating issue is but one of Siegel's arguments against the Baron thesis.

¹² James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, ed. William V. Harris, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 371-76. In the case of Bruni's *Dialogues*, dating both books to the post-crisis period disproves Baron's claim that the strikingly different sentiments expressed therein reflect Bruni's shift towards civic humanism following the conflict with Milan.

¹³ Marvin B. Becker, "The Florentine Territorial State and Civic Humanism in the Early Renaissance," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 109-39.

¹⁴ Witt, "The Crisis after Forty Years," 117-18. Witt's conception of civic humanism here is, in a sense, Kristellian, seeing its development as a consequence of trends in rhetoric.

sources, not just the conflict between Florence and Milan. There may have been such a thing as civic humanism in early Quattrocento Florence, but it did not come solely (or even primarily) due to an external conflict.

Baron's third claim, that the civic humanism that emerged in Florence in this period helped lay the foundation for what would become the republican polity that characterizes western Europe and North America, is by far the most ambitious. It seems to have attracted less attention from Renaissance scholars than the other two components of his thesis. One possible explanation is the hesitance of historians of the Renaissance to engage with the question of the origins of modernity, smacking as it does of the teleological approach that permeates Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. In any case, this component of Baron's thesis found its greatest support in the work of J.G.A. Pocock, which sought to trace the connections between various instances of republican thought throughout the centuries. According to Pocock, these connections were so strong that by the time of the American Revolution, "[n]ot all American were schooled in... [the] tradition [of classical republicanism] but there was... no alternative tradition in which to be schooled."¹⁵ In other words, the ideology of the American Revolution can be traced back to the civic humanism described by Baron. On the other hand, more recent work, by scholars such as Joyce Appleby, John Diggins, and Paul Rahe, has shown that the Founding Fathers were primarily Lockean in their political beliefs and found fault with both the republics of antiquity and of medieval Italy. The founders of the American republic self-consciously created a new form of government that would "replace classical factions with modern interests, classical virtue with modern industry, classical direct democracy with diluted modern representation."¹⁶ This

¹⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 507.

¹⁶ William J. Connell, "The Republican Idea," in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 26-27. For further discussion of the

scholarship appears to sound the death knell for the third component of Baron's thesis, for if the genesis of the key ideology of the American Revolution is found in the writings of Locke, not in the tradition of classical republicanism, of which Bruni formed a vital link, Baron's claim that civic humanism led directly to the republicanism that characterized the later Atlantic world is necessarily false.

All three major components of Baron's thesis have been subjected to spirited critique in the half century since its initial articulation. Civic humanism was not an entirely new development of the fifteenth century. Republican ideas had been expressed by Trecento humanists like Ptolemy and Petrarch. Nor can civic humanism be seen as the committed political philosophy of Leonardo Bruni, for Bruni was to use his rhetorical skills in the service of the Medici and the papacy later in his life. Perhaps most devastatingly for Baron's idealization of Florence, the prevalence of republican-themed humanist thought in Quattrocento Florence did not translate into a "truly" republican polity. There is evidence that a variety of factors, both internal and external to Florence, led to the emergence of civic humanism in the early years of the fifteen century. Later republican thought, like that of the founders of the American republic, did not draw exclusively or even considerably from a republican tradition that was reborn in the civic humanism of Quattrocento Florence.

Given the range and strength of the conclusions just given, one might wonder whether anything can be salvaged from Baron's initial conception of civic humanism. Did civic humanism even exist? The answer is yes, but not necessarily in Baron's terms. Any account of civic humanism in Quattrocento Florence must incorporate several components. First, as demonstrated by Martines, civic humanism was a product of and for elites. Second, as seen in the work of

novelty of the American political experiment, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, 1998 ed. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 593-615.

Jurdjevic and Najemy, the realities of Florentine politics did not reflect the ideals of civic humanism. Third, civic humanism expressed faith in disinterested republican leaders acting, in the classical mode, for the common good. It is this third aspect of civic humanism that Baron so effectively evinced. Baron's work, however, failed to incorporate the elite nature of civic humanism and the slippage between republican ideology and the reality of Florentine politics.

Recent scholarship has reformulated civic humanism in such a way as to capture all these aspects. John Najemy has seen civic humanism as a powerful elite ideology that promoted a particular political vision, even as civic humanists recognized that that vision was not being fulfilled. Najemy located civic humanism's success in the displacement of an older tradition of guild republicanism which self-consciously embraced a diversity of interests in government by a new elite republicanism that stressed the virtue of civic leaders. By emphasizing the virtue of the Florentine political system, its leaders, and its ability to serve the public good, civic humanists buttressed "both the newly established hegemony of Florence's elite families and... the subordinate political and social status to which the middle ranks of Florentine society were now relegated."¹⁷ Viewing Florentine civic humanism as a "myth" used by elites to consolidate their power neatly incorporates both the wealth of republican thought catalogued by Baron and the realities of Florentine political culture. Ultimately, Baron's error was in reading the works of Bruni and other civic humanists as an accurate depiction of how politics in Florence actually functioned. It turned out that Baron's error was a fruitful one, leading as it did to extensive research into Florentine political culture, the development of political thought in the Renaissance, and republican traditions in the Atlantic world. Just as Jacob Burckhardt did nearly a century before, Hans Baron ushered in a new era of Renaissance studies.

¹⁷ John Najemy, "Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics," in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80-81, 103.

Works Cited

- Baron, Hans. *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*. Revised ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966.
- Becker, Marvin B. "The Florentine Territorial State and Civic Humanism in the Early Renaissance." In *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, edited by Nicolai Rubinstein, 109-39. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- Blythe, James M. "'Civic Humanism' and Medieval Political Thought." In *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, edited by James Hankins, 30-74. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Connell, William J. "The Republican Idea." In *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, edited by James Hankins, 14-29. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Hankins, James. "The 'Baron Thesis' after Forty Years, and Some Recent Studies of Leonardo Bruni." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 2 (1995): 309-38.
- . *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*. Edited by William V. Harris. 2 vols. Vol. 2, *Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990.
- Jurdjevic, Mark. "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici." *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1999): 994-1020.
- Martines, Lauro. *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy*. Johns Hopkins ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- . *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, 1390-1460*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.
- Najemy, John. "Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics." In *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, edited by James Hankins, 75-104. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- . *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982.
- Pocock, J.G.A. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- Rabil, Arthur, Jr. "The Significance of Civic Humanism." In *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, edited by Arthur Jr. Rabil, 141-74. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- Seigel, Jerrold E. "'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni." *Past and Present* 34 (1966): 3-48.
- Witt, Ronald. "The Crisis after Forty Years." *American Historical Review* 101, no. 1 (1996): 110-18.
- Wood, Gordon S. *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*. 1998 ed. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.