



<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic> • ISSN 1492-7810
2008/09 • Vol. 8, No. 1

Richard Franklin Sigurdson, *Jacob Burckhardt's Social and Political Thought*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. xii + 272. CDN\$58.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0-8020-4780-7.

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In this fine volume on the Swiss born thinker Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), Richard Sigurdson sets out with two goals. First, he aims to “make a modest contribution to the larger project of intellectual history, especially to the study of the history of social and political ideas of the tumultuous nineteenth century.” In that endeavour he aims not to “advocate Burckhardt’s political point of view” but “to explicate his political views, which have been previously under-appreciated, and to give his ideas the kind of careful consideration that might spur on others to engage in further examination and critical analysis.” Second, Sigurdson hopes “to help introduce Burckhardt to a larger English-speaking academic audience” (ix).

While Burckhardt is most often remembered today — when he is remembered at all — for his contributions to historiography especially as author of *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), Sigurdson aims to cast light on Burckhardt’s social and political ideas, noting however that “we must make use of his entire corpus if we are to appreciate the breadth and depth of his socio-political thought” (6). Giving attention to Burckhardt’s published works, public lectures, and private correspondence, Sigurdson presents his thoroughly-researched findings in a gracefully-written book divided into two parts.

Part one, “Burckhardt and the Birth of Cultural History,” is largely concerned to define Burckhardt as a historical thinker. Sigurdson explores Burckhardt’s thought from the perspective of his major historical writings that are interpreted against both a broad historiographical context and within Burckhardt’s particular life experiences not only in Basel where he spent much time, but in other parts of the Europe of his day. This included his “flight to Italy,” as well as Germany, where he sat as a student for the history lectures of Leopold von Ranke and others of the German Historical School and sparked a friendship with Gottfried Kinkel. Along the way, Sigurdson weighs in on several key historiographical debates such as the “Ranke-Burckhardt Problem” which is traced back to an important 1948 address by Friedrich Meinecke, and the relationship of Burckhardt’s historical thought to writers as disparate as Niccolò Machiavelli, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Arthur Schopenhauer, among others. One potentially interesting point of comparison that goes unexplored in this volume but which may prove worth pursuing is David Hume who shares much with Sigurdson’s Burckhardt. Sigurdson is measured in his assessments, pointing out what Burckhardt absorbed from other thinkers while being careful to illustrate how he differed from them.

Living in an age of tremendous change and disruption that followed the French Revolution and its consequences, Burckhardt came to see that “the foundation for our sense of humanity, and the source of our civilization, lie not in our membership in an impressive nation-state, but rather in our sharing of a

vibrant culture" (23). Or, as Sigurdson puts it later: "Culture—manifest as art, myth, poetry, and so on — is the most concrete expression of . . . human freedom. In works of art, from whatever time and whatever place, we can experience the essential liberty of the human spirit. And in our own lives we can escape the oppressive rationalization and technocratization of modern existence through the appreciation of art. But more than that, we can become artistic through the exercise of our creative and imaginative powers of historical memory" (88). What was history to Burckhardt? Sigurdson quotes an intriguing passage:

To me history is poetry on the grandest scale; don't misunderstand me, I do not regard it romantically or fantastically, all of which is quite worthless, but as a wonderful process of chrysalis-like transformations, of ever new disclosures and revelations of the spirit . . . history to me is sheer poetry, that can be mastered through contemplation. You philosophers go further, your system penetrates into the depths of the secrets of the world, and to you history is a source of knowledge, a science, because you see, or think you see, the *primum agens* where I only see mystery and poetry. (90)

For these and other reasons, Sigurdson argues that Burckhardt clearly "wrote against the spirit of his age" but that "he did not, as so many suggest, escape outside it" (127).

Part Two, "Burckhardt's Social and Political Thought," converges on Burckhardt's political thought, including his perspectives on "democracy," "equality," "the state," "society," and "freedom." His thoughts on those topics are placed in relation to the thoughts of contemporary and near-contemporary political thinkers such as Edmund Burke, Wilhelm von Humboldt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville. Sigurdson writes that "on the whole, Burckhardt's views on human nature are shot through with pessimism and scepticism" (162), and that "Burckhardt took seriously the possibility that the mass age might mean the end of history. He feared that a complete severance of the modern world from the cultural inheritance of the past would trap individuals in an ever-changing present with no recourse to past experience as a guide" (150). Sigurdson astutely concludes that it is Burckhardt's "passive acceptance of the world as it is, for better or worse, that many moderns, with their overweening confidence in human power, find so frustrating in Burckhardt's work" (196).

But the political thinker with whom Burckhardt is most often compared is Friedrich Nietzsche. Their personal and intellectual relationship has been the subject of much scholarly speculation and is the focus of Sigurdson's final chapter, "Burckhardt and Nietzsche: Two Critiques of Modernity." Sigurdson convincingly draws parallels between the two but also contrasts Burckhardt's "historicizing scepticism" which was the result of his "nostalgic anti-modernism" with Nietzsche's radicalized version which "orients itself not lovingly to the past but rather destructively to the present and obsessively towards a fantasized future" (217).

How do we measure Sigurdson's book against the two goals it sets out to accomplish? Sigurdson has wonderfully accomplished his first goal of explicating Burckhardt's political views and hopefully he is equally successful with his second goal of expanding Burckhardt's audience. Certainly readers of his notable and important volume — be they professional historians, political scientists, philosophers, or any other members of the intellectually curious — will be much better for it.