Kahan, Alan S. "Jacob Burckhardt's Dystopic Liberalism." *Liberal Moments: Reading Liberal Texts*. By Ewa Atanassow and Alan S. Kahan. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016. 113–119. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474251082.0021>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 09:01 UTC.

Copyright © Ewa Atanassow, Alan S. Kahan and Contributors 2017. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Jacob Burckhardt's Dystopic Liberalism

Alan S. Kahan

The great harm was begun in the last century, mainly through Rousseau, with his doctrine of the goodness of human nature. Out of this plebs and educated alike distilled the doctrine of the golden age which was to come quite infallibly, provided people were left alone. The result, as every child knows, was the complete disintegration of the idea of authority in the heads of mortals, whereupon, of course, we periodically fall victim to sheer power. In the meantime the idea of the natural goodness of man has turned, among the intelligent strata of Europe, into the idea of progress, i.e. undisturbed money-making and modern comforts, with philanthropy as a sop to conscience. ... The only conceivable salvation would be for this insane optimism, in great and small, to disappear from people's brains. ... A change will and must come, but only after God knows how much suffering.¹

Men are no longer willing to leave the most vital matters to society, because they want the impossible and imagine that it can only be secured under compulsion from the state. ... Absolutely everything that people know or feel that society will not undertake is simply heaped onto the daily growing burden of the state. At every turn, needs grow, bearing their theories with them, and not only needs, but debt, the chief, miserable folly of the nineteenth century.

Now power is of its nature evil, whoever wields it.²

Our task, in lieu of all wishing, is to free ourselves as much as possible from foolish joys and fears and to apply ourselves above all to the understanding of historical development. ... Out of the jumble and confusion we shall win a spiritual possession; in it we want to find not woe, but wealth.³

There are many Jacob Burckhardts. The best known is the Renaissance Burckhardt, thanks to his masterpiece *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*

(1860). There is Burckhardt the founder of cultural history, one of the great masters of historiography, despite his contempt for such professional discussions. There is Burckhardt the disturbingly accurate prophet of the disasters of the European twentieth century. There is Burckhardt the great friend and great opponent of Nietzsche. The list could be extended almost indefinitely. But all the different Burckhardts on the list would have one thing in common – that there was something in each one to make readers of every political stripe uncomfortable, liberals included. He liked Bismarck no more than he liked Jews – which was not at all.⁴ He was equally as contemptuous of the view that *laissez-faire* could save the world as of the view that the government could do so. Both views were entirely too optimistic about human nature.

For Burckhardt, ‘liberal’ was more often a term of abuse than of praise. Nevertheless, he was a liberal. His quarrel with the liberals of his day (he was born in 1818 and died in 1897) was that he saw them as complicit in the destruction of the foundations of liberal society. Regardless of who or what was responsible for it, however, the future Burckhardt foresaw was grim. He thought so for solidly liberal reasons. As a liberal, Burckhardt wanted to limit power, especially government power, because of the cruelties and savagery it would otherwise inevitably inflict. Burckhardt’s liberalism was a ‘liberalism of fear’, such as the one described by Judith Shklar.⁵ He regarded power as evil, and saw it as becoming ever greater and more concentrated. This was a necessary consequence of Burckhardt’s view that human nature was not good, *pace* Rousseau, but rather a mixture of good and evil. Burckhardt would have regarded Shklar herself as an insufficiently fearful liberal because she still believed that a liberal society could be preserved in the modern world. Burckhardt’s was a dystopic liberalism, a liberalism constructed with (or despite) the expectation that illiberal forms of social and political organization would triumph in the near and medium term.

Burckhardt feared for nothing less than the end of European civilization, the end of the freedom, diversity and individuality that, in his view, were its hallmark. The sources of his fears are described in the quotations above. First of all, the modern state, no matter who ruled it; second, democracy, in both Tocquevillian senses of that word, namely the broad effects of equality and, in particular, universal suffrage; and third, commercial society, that is, the effects of a globalized capitalism, to name only his most pressing concerns. All three were linked to the optimism that had conquered European culture, which encouraged people to hope for too much from power, and to fear it too little.

The modern state, in Burckhardt's view, was acquiring unheard-of powers, and using them for unheard-of purposes. While the form of the state was increasingly open to question, its power and scope were ever greater. People wanted the government to do things; they had become capable of forcing governments to carry out their wishes, and in order to carry them out the state grew ever more powerful – ultimately at the expense of the people. In short, the state was acquiring, with its unprecedented new power, an unprecedented capacity for evil.

Burckhardt largely identified political democracy with threat rather than with opportunity, at least in the modern context (he thought differently about medieval and Renaissance city republics or the *polis*). Nineteenth-century democracy provoked in him the fear of despotism rather than an anticipation of liberation. With the growth of democracy, and especially of universal suffrage, all limits on the state were doomed to disappear. Not that Burckhardt had some better political alternative in mind. He foresaw an alternative to ever-increasing popular demands and ever-growing state intervention to carry them out, but it was not a happy one: 'As long as some power doesn't shout: Shut up! That power can really only emerge from the depth of evil, and the effect will be hair-raising.' Burckhardt foretold that the end of universal suffrage would be a period of 'sheer, unlimited violence, and it will take precious little account of the right to vote Such is the inevitable end of the constitutional state, based on law, once it succumbs to counting hands and the consequences thereof.' For those reading Burckhardt during and after the Great Depression and the First World War, with fascism and communism in mind, the meaning of his dark words about democracy seemed clear.⁶

Burckhardt was also afraid of the consequences of what to many liberals seemed naturally good, namely the rise of a commercial society and global capitalism. For Burckhardt, after the French Revolution 'money' became 'the great measure of things, poverty the greatest vice'. The pursuit of greater material well-being was equally all-absorbing for rich and poor. This all-consuming passion encouraged the masses to make ever-greater demands. Driven purely by materialism, the only remaining universally acknowledged standard left, people were willing, in Burckhardt's view, to sacrifice their desire for freedom, their individuality and their diversity whenever necessary to preserve their wealth. Many liberals envisaged a limited state as merely a means of protecting property. Burckhardt thought that they were pursuing a chimaera. The same materialistic impulse which made them want to restrict the state in order to lower their taxes

and maximize their profits worked in the opposite direction among the masses, whose equally strong materialism and optimism led them to strengthen the state so that it could fulfil their desires. And the state itself was liable to take control of all the vast wealth created by society, for the purpose of feeding its own insatiable appetite for power.⁷

Burckhardt's fear of modernity did not lead him to become a conservative, however. He did not believe that conservatism had any future, and he was alive to all the defects of its past. There was no golden age, past, present or future, in Burckhardt's view. Although there were some shining moments in European history, all had their shadow sides. He definitively debunked the notion of fortunate and unfortunate periods in history in his *Historical Reflections*. Nevertheless, the period he liked best is revealing. 'We ought never to forget Renan's words about the period of the July Monarchy [1830–48]: "those eighteen years, the best that France ever experienced, and perhaps humanity!"' Yet even they were 'a mere intermission in the great drama'. In the French July Monarchy, where, by contrast, Tocqueville saw an ultimately unbearable stagnation, Burckhardt saw merely a pause in the process of the destruction of European civilization.⁸

According to Burckhardt, nothing was likely to prevent the decline of Western civilization from continuing. While he found attempts to revive the past fruitless (the existing dynasties were merely the 'managers and messenger boys of mass movements'), he saw no remedy for the dangers Europe faced. Although other liberals, notably other 'aristocratic liberals'⁹ such as John Stuart Mill or Tocqueville, shared many or even all of Burckhardt's fears, Burckhardt's degree of pessimism was unique among nineteenth-century liberals. He discounted the effects and even the desirability of all the usual liberal responses to illiberalism. Burckhardt was almost equally dubious and fearful of nationalism and internationalism, so often appealed to by other liberals. Even the greatest liberal panacea of them all, universal education, found no grace in his eyes.¹⁰

In his youth, Burckhardt, a German-speaking Swiss from Basel, had been briefly a convert to German nationalism. He returned from his university studies in Berlin determined to convince his fellow citizens that they were Germans, but he never believed in a German state and soon lost his enthusiasm for nationalism. While he recognized it as a power, as a power it was to be feared more than loved. Nationalism meant centralization of power in national governments, and struggles for power on an international scale, with the corresponding militarism.

His fear of nationalism did not make Burckhardt into an advocate of a 'United States of Europe', however, much less a world government. He mocked the Enlightenment and the French Revolution's talk about 'humanity' and

'cosmopolitanism'. He recognized the powerful cultural, economic and social forces which united Europe, but was equally cognizant of their weakness in times of crisis: 'in unhealthy situations botched by parliaments one falls back on his descent and lineage as a saving solution of the intolerable, until one finally gets his way, without being better off for it than before.' That it is not hard to apply his words to the Greek crisis of 2015 or Britain's vote to withdraw from the European Union as an indication of the power of his political insight.¹¹ Perhaps because he was writing before the world wars, Burckhardt thought it more likely that national rather than international solidarities would triumph in Europe. In any event, either was likely to increase the desire for greater power to attain greater ends that filled Burckhardt with ever-greater fear for Europe.¹²

Under the circumstances, Burckhardt thought that education was likely to be counter-productive, at least the kind of education which one could offer the masses. In one of his letters, after noting the huge expenses entailed by the free and compulsory primary education recently introduced in Basel, he wrote: 'And naturally, as a result, everyone dissatisfied with everything ... a scramble for higher positions, which are of course very limited in number.' Universal education was only another form of universal optimism. If he thought little of opportunities for the mass man, he thought even less of opportunities for the mass woman. Burckhardt saw no good purpose for 'the absolutely insane insistence upon scholarship that goes on in girls' schools.' The educational system was heading for a dead end. 'And like many other bankruptcies, the schools will one day go bankrupt, because the whole thing will become impossible. ... It may even be that the present educational system has reached its peak, and is approaching its decline.'¹³

Thus, for Burckhardt, all the usual liberal solutions increased the power of the state or the demands upon it in a mutually reinforcing and vicious circle. Power was the problem, and solutions that merely increased the power of one or another aspect of society were no solution. How could power be limited? Burckhardt rejected all the usual answers to this perennial liberal question. He had no faith that the constitutional state could survive the destructive pressures from above and below with which it was confronted. Only by somehow reducing those pressures could breathing room be found.

'The only conceivable salvation would be for this insane optimism, ... , to disappear from people's brains. But then our present-day Christianity is not equal to the task; it has gone in for and got mixed up with optimism for the last two hundred years. A change will and must come, but after God knows how much suffering.' Too much optimism was the ultimate culprit. Could

it be reversed by any means short of catastrophe? No merely political, much less economic, solution would be viable. Only a spiritual remedy might work. Speaking in a deeply pessimistic tone about Germany between the Austro-Prussian War and the Franco-Prussian War, Burckhardt wrote: 'If the German spirit ... is capable of opposing that violence with a new art, poetry and religion, then we are saved, but if not, not. I say: religion, because without a supernatural will to counterbalance the whole power and money racket, it can't be done.' As a liberal, Burckhardt argued to the end that power had to be and eventually would be opposed. Where this new force was to come from Burckhardt could not say, and in his later period he held out only the vague hope that 'mankind is as yet not destined for downfall, and Nature is creating as graciously as ever'.¹⁴

Burckhardt's liberal pessimism might have escaped much notice by posterity had it not led to some remarkably prescient remarks about Europe and, especially, about Germany, chiefly found in his correspondence though often hinted at in his posthumously published university lectures, where his views about the present were deliberately put in slightly obscure terms so as not to frighten the students. For example, Burckhardt predicted at various points that militarism would become the 'model for existence' in Germany, and that 'inevitably the military state will have to turn industrialist'; that liberals would gradually abandon their defence of the Jews, who would soon suffer renewed persecution (justified, alas, in Burckhardt's eyes); that constitutional states would be overthrown by violence in the name of the people; that the dynasties would be replaced as heads of state by republican but far more brutal rulers. To readers during the Second World War and the first decades of the Cold War, these statements seemed to be horribly accurate prophecies and Burckhardt's popularity in the Anglo-Saxon and the Germanophone world spiked sharply in this period. Despite his hostility to democracy and his anti-Semitism, both largely glossed over or overlooked by commentators at this time, his warnings about the direction of European civilization were interpreted as accurate predictions of totalitarianism, and the opponents of fascism and communism saw in Burckhardt a prophet who had understood what was to come far better than any of the theorists of progress. For Friedrich Hayek in 1944, Burckhardt was among those writers who could provide Europe 'the political re-education it needs'. An optimistic and, to some degree, superficial reading of Burckhardt, to be sure, yet one that was common in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁵

Burckhardt, however, was not a Cold War liberal, fighting the Soviets without any reservations about Western society. It is not simply that his context was

different, but that his liberalism was far more dystopic than that of the Cold Warriors. He saw no salvation in *laissez-faire*, which in his view was just as much a product of unbridled eighteenth-century optimism as socialism. Above all, he did not look forward to his side's eventual victory, since he thought that very few people were really on his side. Nor was he apolitical, which has sometimes been suggested, as shown by his close, indeed prophetic observation of the political events of his time.

Burckhardt's only response to modernity was a spiritual one. The son of the senior Protestant pastor of Basel, destined for a clerical career himself, Burckhardt abandoned the field of theology when he lost his faith and became a historian instead. It was in study, for spiritual rather than professional purposes, that Burckhardt found grace – not for liberal society, doomed to taste the dregs of the cup it had brewed, but for the liberal individual. Burckhardt's hints at a spiritual remedy for optimism, a possible revaluation of all values that would make the world safe again for liberalism, for constitutions, a limited state and a free individual by reining in all forms of extravagant hope show that Burckhardt's pessimism was not absolute. 'Once it is understood that there never were, nor ever will be, any happy, golden ages in a fanciful sense, one will remain free from the foolish overvaluation of some past, from senseless despair of the present or fatuous hope for the future.' Burckhardt's liberalism lay precisely in a search for appropriate limits (including that most untimely of limits, a limit on optimism, a limit on what one should *hope for*), for limits that recognized both the strengths and the weaknesses of human nature. If this was politically excluded in the present, then it needed to be intellectually and spiritually conquered by the individual, through contemplation and the study of history.¹⁶

The passive intellectual resistance to Nazism within Germany (1933–45) has been called an inner or internal migration. Burckhardt was an early internal migrant, who sought in the search for knowledge an asylum for freedom and individuality. As he told his students, 'If in misfortune there is to be some fortune as well, it can only be a spiritual one, facing backward to the rescue of the culture of earlier times, facing forward to the serene and unwearied representation of the spirit in a time which could otherwise be given up entirely to things mundane.' In the end, Burckhardt's dystopic liberalism had an educational programme, but it was not one for this world, at least not for the foreseeable future. Burckhardt's liberalism was a liberalism for stoics.¹⁷