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Renaissance Humanism and the Ambiguities of Modernity: Introduction

~ RAZ CHEN-MORRIS, HANAN YORAN, AND GUR ZAK ~

Over the course of the twentieth century, the search for the origins of modernity shifted from the presumption of progress and emancipation to a more nuanced notion of modernity's tensions and ambiguities. Two examples of this shift are Hans Blumenberg's thesis that modernity is constantly engaged in the search to prove its own legitimacy, and Amos Funkenstein's argument on the theological aspirations and anxieties at the very core of modern science. Other scholars, following Max Weber, have described the emergence of capitalism—a key dimension of modernity—not as the advent of an enlightened or rational attitude towards economic activity but rather as shaped by dogmatic imperatives and religious fears and hopes. Taken together, these critical analyses, developed between the 1900s and 1950s, have played a central role in turning scholarly attention to the darker, melancholic harbingers of the modern age.¹

In their accounts of modernity, Blumenberg and Funkenstein examined the transition from medieval nominalism to early modern astronomy and natural philosophy, while Weber's focus was on the Reformation. All three of them relegated the Renaissance to a secondary role in the narrative of modernity. The essays included in this Special Issue, which are the fruits of a workshop held in June 2011, under the auspices of the Minerva Humanities Center, Tel-Aviv University, Israel, seek to turn scholarly attention back to Renaissance humanism and to examine its role in shaping this ambiguous and ambivalent version of modernity. While Renaissance humanists undoubtedly assumed progressive attitudes and cultural dispositions, their work also expressed—with various degrees of awareness and self-reflection—the internal tensions and paradoxes of modernity. Positing Renaissance humanism at the threshold of modernity thus requires a revisionary examination of the two major historiographical approaches to this intellectual movement, which were elaborated from the 1930s to the 1950s.

In the wake of Jacob Burckhardt's seminal study, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), Hans Baron and Eugenio Garin depicted humanism as a clear break from the mainstream medieval intellectual and cultural tradition and as the origin of



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distinctively modern modes of thought. Both scholars stressed the humanists' role in shaping central modern values and perspectives: the historical disciplines and historical consciousness itself, the development of a secular political language (in the broad sense) that accounted for the particular and the circumstantial, the affirmation of the *vita activa* and the legitimation of the pursuit of decidedly worldly aims such as power, wealth and glory, and the celebration of human dignity and positive human potential.² Furthermore, following Burckhardt's famous formulation of the "discovery of the individual" in the Renaissance, Garin stressed the crucial link between the emergence of historical consciousness in the period and what he described as the "discovery of man." For Garin, it was the new humanist perception of antiquity as a distinct historical period that allowed Renaissance humanists to recognize their own unique position in time, thus leading to the formation of modern conceptions of selfhood.³

The second important interpretation of humanism, offered by Paul Oskar Kristeller, highlighted the social and professional continuity between the humanists and their medieval predecessors. More importantly, Kristeller argued that humanism was a literary movement and for this reason devoid of significant philosophical or scientific importance. For him, the historical significance of humanism stemmed from its transmission of hitherto unknown segments of Greek philosophical inheritance.⁴

Kristeller's interpretation won the day in the English-speaking world and became the dominant paradigm for decades to come. Kristeller's prominence in the American academic world—particularly when compared to Baron's relative marginality—was an important factor in the acceptance of his views. In fact, the American academic establishment was already predisposed to his interpretive approach thanks to the strong influence of prominent medievalists, notably Lynn Thorndike and Charles Haskins, who had waged their own battle against Burckhardt's thesis.⁵ But there were of course more substantive reasons. Garin's and Baron's conception of modernity was uncritically positive and their related historical narrative clearly Whiggish, a story of gradual, though not necessarily linear, progress and enlightenment. Both this rosy picture of modernity and the great narrative of how it came into being, however, were critically examined and rejected by various intellectual currents, which made Kristeller's minimalist interpretation more defensible.⁶ Most importantly, Kristeller's interpretation does provide—from a critical perspective—a good account of various aspects of humanism: intellectually, the humanists associated themselves with rhetoric as opposed to logic and metaphysics, and did not produce a coherent body of knowledge, let alone a systematic philosophy; their literary products were often conventional and sometimes "rhetorical" in the modern pejorative sense. Socially and politically, they tended to associate themselves with the upper classes and often served the dominant secular or ecclesiastical establishments. Consequently, their views tended to be conservative; indeed, their political works usually reflected the hegemonic ideology and the interests of the ruling elite.

Kristeller's interpretive approach proved flexible enough to encompass much of the generic, thematic, and contextual historical research on humanism of the past few decades.⁷ Several studies have articulated the political and social implications of humanism from a Kristellerian perspective. Perhaps the most conclusive among them is Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine's *From Humanism to the Humanities*, in which the

authors dissected the single most important social institution the humanists refashioned in their own image, namely, non-university education. They highlighted the gap between the humanist educators' rhetoric of shaping responsible citizens and the educational practices in their schools, which tended to produce narrow-minded, docile administrators. They also demonstrated that liberal education often functioned as a means of reproducing the existent social stratification and hierarchy.⁸ Thus even those who do not accept Grafton and Jardine's study as a comprehensive reconstruction of humanist education cannot ignore their valid insights.

There are indications, however, that Kristeller's paradigm has run its course. In a perceptive review of the recent literature on humanism, Mark Jurdjevic has shown how the main current trends challenge the Kristellerian framework, which also applies to those scholars whose past works were to a large extent indebted to it.⁹ In retrospect this is not surprising. Kristeller's interpretation is based on a theoretical distinction between philosophy on the one hand and rhetoric and literature on the other.¹⁰ This dichotomy is simply untenable today, as proven in practically every discipline of the human sciences, and there is no need to rehearse the discussions here.

Alongside these two major schools of thought, there were other influential interpretations of Renaissance humanism whose theoretical insights are germane to the current project. One of them is the Warburg school, which focused on the Renaissance's fascination with the occult and its efforts to recover ancient Neoplatonic and hermetic traditions. Central to Warburg's methodology is the notion of *pathosformel*, the formal encapsulation of Dionysian energy embodied principally in the suffering and ecstatic body; this provides creative potential, which is at the heart of the major achievements of Western culture. Pursuing the implications of this notion, either directly or by inspiration, proponents of this school sought to trace the survival of mythical and magical elements in the Renaissance and their subterranean operation in shaping major themes of the modern outlook as well as developing modern sensitivities, from the arts to the exact sciences.¹¹

Another line of interpretation, which emerged in the 1970s within what might be described as the "linguistic turn" in the humanities, focused on the rhetorical aspects of humanism. For scholars such as Nancy Struever, David Quint, Victoria Kahn, and Giuseppe Mazzotta, the humanist fascination with rhetoric is understood not in the Kristellerian fashion as a sign of the philosophical insignificance of the movement, but rather as denoting the awareness of the contingent aspects of reality and the constitutive power of language. These scholars show how the humanist fascination with originality, innovation, and action was always plagued by their heightened awareness of their own relative and limited historical perspective.¹² This theoretical framework may provide a fruitful angle from which to explore the modernity of Renaissance humanism as it highlights the problematic search for the foundations of a discourse that consciously breaks with tradition.

The seven essays in this volume aim to further develop the latter theoretical framework. Rather than accepting the view of modernity as ipso facto benevolent and enlightened, these essays examine the humanist project from a reflective and critical perspective, uncovering the ambiguities and internal tensions that dominated it. The common point of departure of these essays is that the heterogeneity of humanism's

cultural manifestations cannot be reduced to a fixed body of knowledge or to a set of accepted beliefs and convictions. Various works written by humanists were characterized by sanguine cultural energies and optimistic anthropology and thus propagated the original views and modes of thought as described by Garin and Baron. But side by side with these, there are texts—sometimes the same texts—written by humanists that betray a sense of uncertainty and doubt, expressing contempt for the human condition, ideological mystification, and theoretical perplexities.

The basic assumption of the contributions to this volume is that the two aspects of humanism are related. Optimism and doubt are different sides of the same coin, as they are minted from the same presupposition of humanist discourse, namely, the undermining of the metaphysical mooring of human reality. Humanist discourse rejects—usually implicitly—the fundamental assumption of the Western philosophical tradition that behind phenomenal reality there is an intelligible and unchangeable substance. Instead, humanists often assume that human reality is an artifact that can be fashioned by human efforts: hence humanism's sense of liberation, creative cultural energies, and anthropological optimism; and hence the novel historical, ethical, and political theories elaborated by the humanists. But the undermining of the traditional metaphysical order of things necessarily threatens basic beliefs and convictions and creates a sense of cultural dislocation and psychological anxiety. In the intellectual sphere, this shift gave rise to fundamental questions concerning the ultimate foundation of ethics and the legitimation of the political order. It is this ambiguity that characterizes humanist discourse and establishes it as the foundation of modernity itself. In this respect, Renaissance humanism should justifiably be seen as the cradle of the modern age.

Opening this collection is Timothy Kircher's article which traces the fault lines that run through the core of Renaissance humanism's main cultural agenda. Titling his essay "Renaissance Humanism and Its Discontents," Kircher conflates two celebrated titles: Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* and Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. This double allusion tempers Burckhardt's victorious account of the Renaissance as the self-confident discovery of man and nature with the great psychoanalyst's pessimistic diagnosis of the modern existential condition. Kircher projects the cultural malaise that Freud diagnosed in the interwar period onto Leon Battista Alberti, Burckhardt's primary model of The Universal Man of the Renaissance.¹³ He identifies in Alberti's irony the incessant anxieties that undermine the humanistic pursuit of inner moral virtue in the public domain. Kircher, at the same time, perceives this tension and struggle as a major source of cultural creativity.

The two articles that follow probe the fraught relationship between scholastic theologians and new humanist modes of thought and cultural expression. In "The Poeta-Theologus from Mussato to Landino," Ronald G. Witt analyzes the debate about the sources and role of poetic inspiration from the late thirteenth century to Landino in the fifteenth century. Witt shows how Petrarch and Boccaccio insisted that ancient poets were not divinely inspired but rather were motivated by their innate natural capacities. This argument contributed to the formation of distinctively modern modes of thought, among them awareness of historical distance and recognition of the limitations of human knowledge. Witt's nuanced and wide-ranging analysis then shows how the pressures of conservative critics led later humanists such as Salutati to resort at times

to more traditional—and essentially ahistorical—views of divine poetic inspiration, which process culminated in the triumph of Florentine Neoplatonism in the generation after Bruni.

In “The Preacher’s Agenda: A Dominican versus the Italian Renaissance,” Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby tackles the polemics between theologians and the proponents of the new learning by examining the career of the celebrated Dominican preacher Giovanni Dominici (1356–1419). In his sermons and popular preaching, he not only portrays the essential outlines of his humanist opponents but often adapts their rhetorical tools to serve his own scholastic ideals. This analysis reveals the prevalence at the turn of the Quattrocento of the new rhetoric and the way in which Renaissance humanists managed to dialectically establish it as the common frame of reference for both critics and upholders of the ideals of the new learning.

The next four essays turn to issues of ideology and political theory, addressing the role of Renaissance humanism in creating an active and virtuous citizenry within a reformed political community. Reading Bruni’s well-known oration, the *Laudatio florentinae urbis*, against the backdrop of Florence’s revised juridical codes, W. Scott Blanchard argues in “Leonardo Bruni and the Poetics of Sovereignty” that the modern paradoxes of sovereignty, explored by Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, were already present at the dawn of modernity. Examining the inability of the Florentine humanist to unambiguously locate the source of political authority, Blanchard points out the contradiction between the self-image of Florence as a popular regime and its transition to an oligarchic power structure during the early decades of the Quattrocento.

In a complementary article, “Don Isaac Abravanel and Leonardo Bruni: A Literary and Philosophical Confrontation,” Cedric Cohen Skalli reads Bruni’s same oration by juxtaposing it with the Jewish philosopher Don Isaac Abravanel’s commentary on 1 Samuel 8. Cohen Skalli illuminates the shared republican values and vocabulary of the two thinkers, while highlighting the sharp divergence in their attitude to their political and historical environment. His comparative analysis explores the irreducible religious and theological dimension of modern republican political thought.

In *Esse servitutis omnis impatientem / Man is impatient of all servitude: Human Dignity as a Path to Modernity in Ficino and Pico della Mirandola*,” Andreas Niederberger re-examines the political implications of the anthropological premises of the Renaissance Neoplatonic tradition. By analyzing Mirandola’s apparent celebration of human dignity, he suggests that resolving this conceptual tension bears an immediate and crucial relevance to current legal and philosophical discussions on the role and significance of human dignity.

In the final essay, “Glory, Passions and Money in Alberti’s *Della famiglia*: A Humanist Reflects on the Foundations of Society,” Hanan Yoran emphasizes the polyphonic nature of the dialogue and reads it as a reflection on the foundation of politics. Alberti’s dialogue explores several views while critically reflecting on them. It presents, according to Yoran, the traditional view of natural human sociability, yet suggests that this view cannot be squared with the premises of humanist discourse. Likewise, *Della famiglia* utilizes the humanist notion of glory as the basis of politics, but simultaneously exposes the antisocial potential inherent in the notion. Finally, Yoran

argues, Alberti probes the implications of the radical possibility that humans may not become social creatures.

This collection offers a convergence of historical perspectives by reading modernity back into Renaissance texts and simultaneously reading current philosophical problems and debates in light of Renaissance humanism. More specifically, it draws attention to the humanist attempt to contend with the contradictions and anxieties resulting from their own cultural and educational program of renewal and reform. In tackling the various moral, theological, and political issues addressed by Renaissance humanists, this collection contends that this major cultural movement defined, shaped and confronted some of the more troubling questions that haunt modernity. Renaissance humanists critically diagnosed those questions, and suggested ways to wrestle with lingering problems that are still pertinent to the way we understand ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 1983); Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1985). One should read these against the backdrop of the rich critical assessments of modernity arising from Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), as well as from the post-structuralist expositions of the repetitive and non-progressive elements that comprise modern discursive patterns.
2. Hans Baron's view is presented in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in the Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), and *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988). An early formulation of Eugenio Garin's interpretation appears in his *Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, trans. Peter Munz (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965). It was subsequently elaborated and revised in various publications, including *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano: Ricerche e documenti* (Firenze: G. C. Sansoni, 1961) and *Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi e ricerche*, 3d ed. (Bari: Laterza, 1981). See also Garin's theoretical and autobiographical reflections in his *La filosofia come sapere storico con un saggio autobiografico* (Roma: Laterza, 1990). The differences between the two approaches mainly arise from Baron's insistence that adherence to republicanism—by those he dubbed civic humanists—played a crucial role in the elaboration of humanist thought. For the present discussion these differences are inconsequential.
3. See Garin, *Italian Humanism*, 15. Garin's insight has been further developed in discussions of the emergence of modern conceptions of authorship in the period. See especially David Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature: Versions of the Source* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).
4. Paul Oskar Kristeller's interpretation is synthetically formulated in several articles. The most well-known—and probably the most cited texts in the field—are “The Humanist Movement” and “Humanism and Scholasticism,” in *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, ed. Michael Mooney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 21–32 and 85–105, respectively.

5. Angelo Mazzocco speculates that Kristeller actually took the notion of continuity between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance from his American colleagues. See his "Introduction," in *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Angelo Mazzocco (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 15.
6. The result of Kristeller's intellectual endeavor is ironic, insofar as his own notion of Western history is distinctly Whiggish. In the last paragraph of "The Humanist Movement" (32), for example, he expresses his view that science and philosophy form the core of Western civilization the crucial periods of which are thus classical Greece and the seventeenth century.
7. One notable exception is the history of political thought which was deeply influenced by Baron's interpretation of the break between humanist and medieval political discourses. See William J. Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty: Renaissance Values in the Age of the Counter Reformation* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1968); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).
8. Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). Again, the irony of Kristeller's position is highlighted. Kristeller was strongly, intellectually as well as emotionally, attached to the classical education of his youth, and was convinced that the maladies of the contemporary world did not result from liberal education but from its abandonment. These are indeed the focal themes of his autobiographical sketch "A Life of Learning," at http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:-gOHyBTP2HAJ:https://www.acls.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/OP/Haskins/1990_PaulOskarKristeller.pdf+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=il&client=firefox-a.
9. Mark Jurdjevic, "Hedgehogs and Foxes: The Present and Future of Italian Renaissance Intellectual History," *Past and Present* 195 (2007): 241–68. The studies that are relevant to our discussion include Christopher Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance: Humanists, Historians, and Latin's Legacy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Riccardo Fubini, *Humanism and Secularization: From Petrarch to Valla*, trans. Martha King (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); James Hankins, "Humanism and the Origins of Modern Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Ronald G. Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). It is perhaps indicative that in his "Introduction," Mazzocco is somewhat apologetic about Kristeller's interpretation of humanism, arguing that "a close reading" reveals that Kristeller's interpretive framework is less limited than appears at first sight (14–16).
10. In fact there is a tension at the heart of Kristeller's interpretation between this theoretical premise and his historical findings that humanism had a pervasive influence on all aspects of culture, including science and philosophy. Kristeller is thus unable to theoretically account for his assertions in "The Humanist Movement" that some humanists "were able to add genuine wisdom to their eloquence" (29), that the adoption of the humanist "taste for elegance, neatness, and clarity of style" was "not always or entirely a mere external feature" in the works of contemporary philosophers and scientist (30), and that generally humanism "had important philosophical implications and consequences" (31). For a fuller discussion of Kristeller's interpretation, see Hanan Yoran, *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 18–21.
11. The most celebrated examples are Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958); Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1964). At this point one may mention Ernst Cassirer's encounter as rector of the University of Hamburg with the Warburg Library in 1919, which led him to change his view of the role of scientific rationality in Western culture. Cassirer first expressed his new understanding in his *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Chicago, IL:

The University of Chicago Press, 1963): originally published as *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1927); and later in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim, intro. Charles W. Hendel (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965); originally published as *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (Berlin: B. Cassirer, 1923–29). Still later he ends his *Myth of the State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1945) with the Babylonian myth of the battle between Marduk and the serpent Tiamat. In vanquishing the monster, Marduk created the different orders of the universe out of its severed limbs, thus leaving a component of a chaotic power of destruction in a precarious balance at the very heart of the well-arranged cosmos.

12. See, for example, Nancy S. Struever, *The Language of History in the Renaissance: Rhetoric and Historical Consciousness in Florentine Humanism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature*, and Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).
13. And so Alberti is portrayed in Joan Gadol, *Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1969).