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Jacob Burckhardt

Excerpt

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PART I.

THE STATE AS A WORK OF ART

VOL. I.

B

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

THIS work bears the title of an essay in the strictest sense of the word. No one is more conscious than the writer with what limited means and strength he has addressed himself to a task so arduous. And even if he could look with greater confidence upon his own researches he would hardly thereby feel more assured of the approval of competent judges. To each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a given civilisation present a different picture ; and in treating of a civilisation which is the mother of our own, and whose influence is still at work among us, it is unavoidable that individual judgment and feeling should tell every moment both on the writer and on the reader. In the wide ocean upon which we venture, the possible ways and directions are many ; and the same studies which have served for this work might easily, in other hands, not only receive a wholly different treatment and application, but lead also to essentially different conclusions. Such indeed is the importance of the subject, that it still calls for fresh investigation, and may be studied with advantage from the most varied points of view. Meanwhile we are content if a patient

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hearing be granted us, and if this book be taken and judged as a whole. It is the most serious difficulty of the history of civilisation that a great intellectual process must be broken up into single, and often into what seem arbitrary categories, in order to be in any way intelligible. It was formerly our intention to fill up the gaps in this book by a special work on the 'Art of the Renaissance,'—an intention, however, which we have been able only to fulfil¹ in part.

The struggle between the Popes and the Hohenstaufen left Italy in a political condition which differed essentially from that of the other countries of the West. While in France, Spain, and England the feudal system was so organised that, at the close of its existence, it was naturally transformed into a unified monarchy, and while in Germany it helped to maintain, at least outwardly, the unity of the empire, Italy had shaken it off almost entirely. The Emperors of the fourteenth century, even in the most favourable case, were no longer received and respected as feudal lords, but as possible leaders and supporters of powers already in existence; while the Papacy,² with its creatures and

¹ *History of Architecture*, by Franz Kugler. (The first half of the fourth volume, containing the 'Architecture and Decoration of the Italian Renaissance,' is by the Author.)

² Macchiavelli, *Discorsi*, l. i. c. 12. 'E la cagione, che la Italia non sia in quel medesimo termine, ne habbia anch' ella ò una republica ò un prencipe che la governi, è solamente la Chiesa; perchè havendovi habitato e tenuto imperio temporale non è stata sì potente ne di tal virtù, che l'habbia potuto occupare il restante d'Italia e farsene prencipe.'

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allies, was strong enough to hinder national unity in the future, not strong enough itself to bring about that unity. Between the two lay a multitude of political units—republics and despots—in part of long standing, in part of recent origin, whose existence was founded simply on their power to maintain it.¹ In them for the first time we detect the modern political spirit of Europe, surrendered freely to its own instincts, often displaying the worst features of an unbridled egoism, outraging every right, and killing every germ of a healthier culture. But, wherever this vicious tendency is overcome or in any way compensated, a new fact appears in history—the state as the outcome of reflection and calculation, the state as a work of art. This new life displays itself in a hundred forms, both in the republican and in the despotic states, and determines their inward constitution, no less than their foreign policy. We shall limit ourselves to the consideration of the completer and more clearly defined type, which is offered by the despotic states.

The internal condition of the despotically governed states had a memorable counterpart in the Norman Empire of Lower Italy and Sicily, after its transformation by the Emperor Frederick II.² Bred amid

¹ The rulers and their dependents were together called 'lo stato,' and this name afterwards acquired the meaning of the collective existence of a territory.

² C. Winckelmann, *De Regni Siculi Administratione qualis fuerit regnante Friderico II.*, Berlin, 1859. A. del Vecchio, *La legislazione di Federico II. imperatore.* Turin, 1874. Frederick II. has been fully and thoroughly discussed by Winckelmann and Schirrmacher.

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treason and peril in the neighbourhood of the Saracens, Frederick, the first ruler of the modern type who sat upon a throne, had early accustomed himself, both in criticism and action, to a thoroughly objective treatment of affairs. His acquaintance with the internal condition and administration of the Saracenic states was close and intimate; and the mortal struggle in which he was engaged with the Papacy compelled him, no less than his adversaries, to bring into the field all the resources at his command. Frederick's measures (especially after the year 1231) are aimed at the complete destruction of the feudal state, at the transformation of the people into a multitude destitute of will and of the means of resistance, but profitable in the utmost degree to the exchequer. He centralised, in a manner hitherto unknown in the West, the whole judicial and political administration by establishing the right of appeal from the feudal courts, which he did not, however, abolish, to the imperial judges. No office was henceforth to be filled by popular election, under penalty of the devastation of the offending district and of the enslavement of its inhabitants. Excise duties were introduced; the taxes, based on a comprehensive assessment, and distributed in accordance with Mohammedan usages, were collected by those cruel and vexatious methods without which, it is true, it is impossible to obtain any money from Orientals. Here, in short, we find, not a people, but simply a disciplined multitude of subjects; who

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were forbidden, for example, to marry out of the country without special permission, and under no circumstances were allowed to study abroad. The University of Naples was the first we know of to restrict the freedom of study, while the East, in these respects at all events, left its youth unfettered. It was after the example of Mohammedan rulers that Frederick traded on his own account in all parts of the Mediterranean, reserving to himself the monopoly of many commodities, and restricting in various ways the commerce of his subjects. The Fatimite Caliphs, with all their esoteric unbelief, were, at least in their earlier history, tolerant of the differences in the religious faith of their people; Frederick, on the other hand, crowned his system of government by a religious inquisition, which will seem the more reprehensible when we remember that in the persons of the heretics he was persecuting the representatives of a free municipal life. Lastly, the internal police, and the kernel of the army for foreign service, was composed of Saracens who had been brought over from Sicily to Nocera and Luceria—men who were deaf to the cry of misery and careless of the ban of the Church. At a later period the subjects, by whom the use of weapons had long been forgotten, were passive witnesses of the fall of Manfred and of the seizure of the government by Charles of Anjou; the latter continued to use the system which he found already at work.

At the side of the centralising Emperor appeared

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an usurper of the most peculiar kind : his vicar and son-in-law, Ezzelino da Romano. He stands as the representative of no system of government or administration, for all his activity was wasted in struggles for supremacy in the eastern part of Upper Italy ; but as a political type he was a figure of no less importance for the future than his imperial protector Frederick. The conquests and usurpations which had hitherto taken place in the Middle Ages rested on real or pretended inheritance and other such claims, or else were effected against unbelievers and excommunicated persons. Here for the first time the attempt was openly made to found a throne by wholesale murder and endless barbarities, by the adoption, in short, of any means with a view to nothing but the end pursued. None of his successors, not even Cæsar Borgia, rivalled the colossal guilt of Ezzelino ; but the example once set was not forgotten, and his fall led to no return of justice among the nations, and served as no warning to future transgressors.

It was in vain at such a time that St. Thomas Aquinas, a born subject of Frederick, set up the theory of a constitutional monarchy, in which the prince was to be supported by an upper house named by himself, and a representative body elected by the people ; in vain did he concede to the people the right of revolution.¹ Such theories found no echo outside

¹ Baumann, *Staatslehre des Thomas von Aquino*. Leipzig, 1873, esp. pp. 136 sqq.

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the lecture-room, and Frederick and Ezzelino were and remain for Italy the great political phenomena of the thirteenth century. Their personality, already half legendary, forms the most important subject of 'The Hundred Old Tales,' whose original composition falls certainly within this century.¹ In them Frederick is already represented as possessing the right to do as he pleased with the property of his subjects, and exercises on all, even on criminals, a profound influence by the force of his personality; Ezzelino is spoken of with the awe which all mighty impressions leave behind them. His person became the centre of a whole literature, from the chronicle of eye-witnesses to the half-mythical tragedy² of later poets.

Immediately after the fall of Frederick and Ezzelino, a crowd of tyrants appeared upon the scene. The struggle between Guelph and Ghibelline was their opportunity. They came forward in general as Ghibelline leaders, but at times and under conditions so various, that it is impossible not to recognise in the fact a law of supreme and universal necessity. The means which they used were those already familiar in the party struggles of the past—the banishment or destruction of their adversaries and of their adversaries' households.

¹ *Cento Novelle Antiche*, ed. 1525. For Frederick, Nov. 2, 21, 22, 23, 24, 30, 53, 59, 90, 100; for Ezzelino, Nov. 31, and esp. 84.

² Scardeonius, *De Urbis Patav. Antiqu. in Grævius*, Thesaurus vi. iii. p. 259.

CHAPTER II.

THE TYRANNY OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY.

THE tyrannies, great and small, of the fourteenth century afford constant proof that examples such as these were not thrown away. Their crimes, which were fearful, have been fully told by historians. As states depending for existence on themselves alone, and scientifically organised with a view to this object, they present to us a higher interest than that of mere narrative.

The deliberate adaptation of means to ends, of which no prince out of Italy had at that time a conception, joined to almost absolute power within the limits of the state, produced among the despots both men and modes of life of a peculiar character.¹ The chief secret of government in the hands of the prudent ruler lay in leaving the incidence of taxation so far as possible where he found it, or as he had first arranged it. The chief sources of income were : a land-tax, based on a valuation ; definite taxes on articles of consumption and duties on exported and imported goods ; together with the private fortune of the ruling house.

¹ Sismondi, *Hist. de Rép. Italiennes*, iv. p. 420 ; viii. pp. 1 sqq.