

# Civic humanism

A much debated account of political culture originating in Renaissance Italy

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## Abstract

This entry examines the origins, key characteristics, and changing use of the concept of “civic humanism” by historians. The term originated in the work of twentieth-century historian Hans Baron and described the focus on the active life, republican political forms, and acceptance of vernacular writings that developed in Florence, Italy after 1402. Historians after Baron challenged, supported, expanded, and changed this initial conception. Most recently, a series of articles published in the early 1990s and two separate edited collections published in 2000 and 2015, respectively, have given the concept of civic humanism its current connotations. In the current scholarship civic humanism has lost many of its original characteristics and instead focuses on a more general application of learned culture to the politics of pre-modern Europe. Thus, the concept of civic humanism remains an important tool for historians, even as the historical understanding of it differs markedly from Baron's original thesis.

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## Article

“Civic humanism” describes a political culture and philosophy originating in Renaissance Italy in the 1400s but influential through the American War of Independence in the late 1700s and beyond. The term was originally developed in the first half of the twentieth century by the historian Hans Baron. Although publishing on civic humanism in earlier works, Baron codified this idea in his *Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, published in 1955 and then again in revised form in 1966. For Baron, late medieval Italy was divided into two basic political groups: republics and tyrannies. Baron focused on the republic in Florence, Italy, and argued that late medieval Florentines idealized the contemplative life dedicated to study or prayer over the active life; prized Latin over the vernacular; and traced their origins and thus political subordination back to outside powers like the Roman emperor. All of this changed, Baron claimed, after a political crisis in 1402. He argued that in that year the armies of a Milanese tyrant threatened to conquer republican Florence, destroy its liberty, and subsume the city under a seigniorial yoke. The unexpected death of the tyrant saved Florence and, according to Baron, the city's brush with tyranny brought about the introduction of a new outlook called civic humanism. Baron used the writings of humanists like Leonardo Bruni and Matteo Palmieri to show that the new civic humanist city was characterized by a preference for the active life dedicated to public affairs over the contemplative life; a willingness to accept the importance of vernacular writings alongside Latin ones; and most importantly a belief in the absolute importance of political liberty and the supremacy of republican political forms over monarchical ones. Baron implied that this civic humanism formed the core of Italian Renaissance culture and rescued western civilization from a pre-modern world terrorized by the tyranny of petty despots.

Baron's arguments proved enormously influential among Renaissance historians over the next fifty years. Part of Baron's appeal can be attributed to his characterization of all monarchies as tyrannies and his emphasis on the importance of republican political forms for original thought, both of which

meshed with modern democratic values. In fact, the English historian J.G.A. Pocock picked up Baron's arguments and contended that Florentine civic humanism was carried through various intermediaries and underlay the great political thinkers of seventeenth and early eighteenth-century English history, who in turn influenced many political thinkers active in the thirteen American colonies and then the United States. In a second famous example, William Bouwsma applied Baron's ideas to what he viewed as a similar political crisis with similarly vast ramifications in late sixteenth-century Venice. Civic humanism, in short, for those who accepted these arguments, formed the foundation on which western democracies built their twentieth-century ideals.

Even as it proved enormously influential, Baron's conception of civic humanism as a quite specific movement in intellectual history that was characterized by a handful of identifiable characteristics also met with immediate resistance. Some historians argued that Baron had vastly overestimated the sincerity of men trained to argue conflicting points of view on the same topic. Other historians disputed Baron's highly technical dating of many fourteenth and fifteenth-century neo-Latin texts. These dates were important to Baron because many of his arguments depended on showing how texts written before 1402 differed from those written after the crisis. Still others demonstrated that Baron oversimplified a very complicated situation: many of the characteristics Baron identified as new within the concept of civic humanism were definitively shown to have existed long before the fifteenth century. In addition, historians demonstrated that many of the same innovative aspects of humanist writings found in republican settings found equally sophisticated counterparts in texts originating in monarchical contexts. Thus, the importance of republican political forms to civic humanism and intellectual originality in general was called into question. The civic humanist edifice so carefully constructed by Baron and his many supporters seemed, by the turn of the millennium, to have been demolished by the chisels of dozens of articles and academic monographs.

Since 1995 three major re-evaluations have attempted to piece together the remnants of the civic humanism thesis and reconstruct it, in refined form, for a new generation of scholars. In 1995 the *American Historical Review* published a series of articles that offered differing opinions on the legacy and continued relevance of Baron's civic humanism thesis. Most notably, the renowned scholar Ronald Witt offered a rare defence of many of Baron's central ideas. Alongside these articles, James Hankins published an important historiographical essay in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* that went beyond a simple historiography of civic humanism and offered his own ideas for the future of the concept. Most significantly, Hankins argued in favour of viewing humanists as rhetoricians who were trained and employed to write for or against causes as the situation required, irrespective of their own thoughts on the matter. Five years later Hankins released an edited volume in which numerous notable scholars offered revisions on the thought, figures, and concepts essential to Baron's ideas, such as Leonardo Bruni, Niccolò Machiavelli, republicanism, and the active life. In this book, featuring contributions largely situated within the history of philosophy, careful essays demonstrate the earlier origins of several key components of civic humanism as well as offering differing interpretations for key civic humanist texts. For example, one essay examines key similarities between the ideas expressed by Machiavelli and other strands of political thought, while other contributions show how writings by Leonardo Bruni and other humanists legitimated oligarchic control within the walls of Florence and Florentine imperial ambitions outside the city. Far from a freedom-loving republic, Florence was ruled by the few and sought more to expand its political empire than to defend the political independence of its neighbours. Most recently, two historians of Renaissance political culture, Nicholas Scott Baker and Brian Jeffrey Maxson, edited a second volume explicitly dedicated to the theme of civic humanism. This book sought to examine the validity of the concept of civic humanism after so much scholarship had struck down the concept. Moreover, the book sought to explore other ways in which culture and politics fit together during the Italian Renaissance. As a whole, the articles identify the concept of civic humanism, broadly defined as the application of learned culture to political life, as only one option in a full range of available methodological possibilities to understand

how cultural and political life intersected.

Thus, there is no doubt that, from the standpoint of the history of ideas, the concept first developed by Hans Baron must be used with caution and in ways not foreseen and even in direct contradiction to its original conception. Simultaneously, for historians of political culture there is no doubt of the continued vitality of the concept of civic humanism, broadly conceived as the application of learned culture to the pre-modern political world. Civic humanism should not serve as the sole explanatory framework for understanding the intersections between culture and politics during this period. Instead, civic humanism is one concept among many to explore the history, literature, and art of medieval and early modern Europe.

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