

EPISODE 18

THE RENAISSANCE THAT WASN'T

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number eighteen of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Last time we tried to find, as it were, the foundational assumptions common to all of what I call the classical civilizations which have existed. Today we're going to return to the particular history of what we call the West.

Now, as I believe I've already mentioned, Enlightenment writers absolutely hated the Medieval era. They hated it for its religiosity, they hated it for its veneration of authority, they hated it for its downplaying of the individual, and they hated it for its dislike of the individual ego.

Interestingly, as we shall see, the Romantic period writers which followed the Enlightenment admired the High Middle Ages for its cathedrals, they admired it for its chivalry, and they admired it for its belief in a harmony between God and Nature.

But as we shall also see, the rise of John Stuart Mill and his utilitarian liberal democracy in the mid 19th Century caused a re-evaluation of the world prior to 1500. And in 1855 a French historian by the name of Jules Michelet invented the term and the concept of a Renaissance. The idea here was that, once again, the Middle Ages had been irredeemably brutal and ignorant, but that sometime in the 15th Century there had been a radical rebirth of the human spirit. Which blossomed into the birth of the modern inquisitive mind and of the love of freedom.

And the adoption of this myth over the last 160 years or so has accomplished two goals. First, it has successfully demonized whatever culture and thought that had existed before what I refer to as the 'modern'. Second, by creating a false tradition of 'modern' thinking going back several centuries before the Enlightenment, it makes people think that 'modern' was both inevitable and legitimate.

The point here, however, is to tell you that none of that is true. That the Renaissance never took place. And that this is what really happened:

As you'll recall, when we left the world of 1290 everything seemed to be in fine fettle. Western

Europe was a land of peace and prosperity. Intellectual curiosity was widespread and the Scientific Method was being developed. As I noted: What could possibly go wrong?

Well, just about everything did. And up until they had to deal with the 20th, historians were pretty united on the conclusion that the 14th Century was easily the worst century of the millennium. What they couldn't agree on was what exactly the causes for this were.

One person that they could point to was the (extremely ironically named) Philip the Fair, King of France from 1285-1314. (Although to be, er, fair, his complexion, not his sense of justice, was being referred to.) Anyway, in 1294 he started a war with the king of England, which ended the 13th Century's almost century long reign of peace. In 1306 he expelled the Jews from France. In 1307 he destroyed the religious/military order of the Knights of Templar by torturing all of its members and then burning them at the stake. In 1309 he forced the papacy to move to Avignon in the south of France, where it remained separated from Rome for the next 68 years.

And what was his motivation in doing all of this? Well, he was also the first king—through marriage, luck, and consolidation—to have finished consolidating the centralized large country of France as we know it today. All of which had cost him a lot of money, which he had now owed to those Jews and Knights of Templar, who had been the main moneylenders of the time. And who had he hired to run the huge bureaucracy which was now needed to keep the new France functioning? Not the noblemen which the feudal system would have required him to, but rather legions of lawyers which those Medieval universities were busy churning out. And these lawyers were the ones who craftily pointed out to him that if he liquidated the Jews and the Templars, then he could welch on his debts. Finally, having the pope living in a town surrounded by the rest of France handily solved those old Church-State problems.

But although it is certainly emotionally satisfying to blame the collapse of the refined culture of the High Middle Ages on the rise of the lawyers, there is also something incomplete about this theory. Because if everything was so hunky dory, how could one person, even if he were totally evil, completely screw it up?

Which is why it is so intriguing to find out that relatively recently climate scientists have discovered that starting almost exactly at the year 1300 (and continuing on until around 1850) was a climactic period now called the Little Ice Age.

(Although let's make it clear that, even though the Little Ice Age and the previous Medieval warming period from 950-1250 were not man made, this doesn't mean that our present situation isn't.

Indeed, the fact that relatively minor changes in temperature back then had such extreme effects on the culture and the economy suggests that the probable outcomes in our near future are actually going to be much worse than currently predicted. So good luck on that one.)

Anyway, historians had already known that prolonged deadly famines were a hallmark throughout the 14th Century. Now we know that it was the start of the Little Ice Age that caused this. Characterized by frigid winters and cold, rainy summers, starting in 1304 and continuing until 1390, every several years there were major famines somewhere in Europe, from Scandinavia to the Alps and Pyrenees, from Iceland to Russia. For instance, the worst one, lasting three years from 1315-1317, is estimated to have killed between 10-25% of Europe's people. Nor was it a quick or easy death for the poor souls involved. Not to mention that the social breakdown associated with famine supplied additional gruesome tales of murder and cannibalism. It took fully five years for the effects of this particular famine to subside. And then a couple of years later there was another one.

A cold, wet, malnourished population was also the perfect setup for the Black Death (bubonic plague), which arrived on European shores in 1347. Not seen on the continent since Justinian's plague of the 6th Century, in three years it wiped out more than a third of the people who were still living after all of those famines. At least this time death came quickly. But it meant that by mid-century there was left standing only a small fraction of the population which had populated the High Middle Ages just sixty years earlier. You can imagine what all that meant to hope, happiness, faith, and family.

Let alone peace. Or prosperity.

Which reminds me. The Hundred Years War started in 1337. Which is too complicated to explain here. But what you need to know is that this all encompassing conflict more than compounded all the physical and economic destruction which Nature had already brought about.

So: Just as there was nothing particularly wrong in the world of the dinosaurs before that day 70,000,000 years ago when an asteroid slammed into the Earth, it is incredibly important that you keep remembering that the High Middle Ages were doing just fine right before the Little Ice Age started.

Though that last analogy is a little off on one major point. Because the dinosaurs were completely wiped out. But amidst all the war and misery of the 14th Century our Western civilization, including the life of the mind, still hung on. William of Occam, a major Medieval philosopher and one of those founders of the scientific method, lived from 1287-1347. The great English poet William Chaucer lived from 1343-1400. When one goes to major Medieval museums in Europe one readily

sees that throughout Northern Europe art and sculpture got steadily more sophisticated as the 14th Century progressed.

And Italy in particular was somewhat spared from the worst effects of that bleak period. Yes, it was just as ravaged by the Black Death as was the North. And the economic collapse in the rest of Europe caused by all those famines and by the Hundred Years War also cut severely into the financial well being of the bankers and merchants of Venice and the other major Italian cities. But the Little Ice Age was felt primarily north of the Alps. And the Italian peninsula had always had a much milder and warmer climate to begin with. Which meant that the 14th Century there was more like a long economic depression rather than a total collapse.

But Italy had also always been somewhat of a world apart throughout the Middle Ages. After all, as mentioned earlier, Rome didn't really 'fall' in the year 410 or 476 or whenever. It's much more accurate to say that for several centuries highly Romanized tribes such as the Ostrogoths did their best to try to maintain Roman customs and culture even after central authority had collapsed. And while it is true that, for instance, the Lombards (from Scandinavia), who invaded in 568, were truly barbaric, their rule was only temporary. And in the end they too were Christianized. Further, Italy had always been part and parcel of the Mediterranean basin, and during the Dark Ages the civilizing influences of the Byzantines and the Arabs, plus ongoing trade with them, kept it from the depths of collapse experienced in the rest of Western Christendom. Further, the feudal system never really developed in Italy. Finally, large towns continued to exist, and with them the traditions of civilized urban life. Aristocrats still held onto their villas and their estates, and they still continued to trace their lineage back to the glory days of Rome and empire.

So that when the High Middle Ages finally coalesced in the 11th Century, Italy, and especially its northern part, was in a perfect situation and location. Venice controlled the Adriatic sea lanes, and thus the all important trade routes to Byzantium, the Islamic world, and therefore India and China. At various times Siena, Florence, and Milan each became the center of trade, banking, and manufacturing for the rest of Europe. And—then as now—present wealth became the best predictor of future wealth.

If the life of the mind continued to hang on in Northern Europe in the 14th Century, then, you would probably not be surprised to find out that in Italy there was almost no disruption in the flow of thought and art. Dante finished his *Divine Comedy* in 1320. Boccaccio wrote *The Decameron* in 1350. Most importantly, although the High Middle Ages were already pretty familiar with Aristotle, it was during this era that many more major literary, philosophical and other works from the classical

period of Rome and Greece (conveniently kept safely for all those interim centuries by the Arabs) were re-discovered.

So, yes, the 15th Century definitely saw an economic and cultural upturn from the very low lows of the 14th Century. But was it a totally *new* experience? Any kind of clean break? A Renaissance?

Let's briefly consider the life of Petrarch, a famous scholar and poet who lived from 1304 to 1374. Writers of the Renaissance have celebrated him as the first humanist, as the first to label the preceding millennium as the 'Dark Ages', and even as the first person to ever climb a mountain or go to foreign places simply for the enjoyment of it. In short, he was supposedly the first 'modern' person to walk the face of this Earth.

But one can appreciate his talents while also recognizing that this characterization is way overblown. For one thing, he used the term 'Dark Ages' simply to refer to the absence of those newly found classical texts, not as a rejection of the Church or of the High Middle Ages. Second, anyone with any first (or third) hand experience of curiosity and playfulness and enjoyment in other peoples and cultures would find it absurd to think that others in other times and places also wouldn't travel just to see what was there, or wouldn't do things just for the fun of it. Indeed the ancient Greeks were famously tourists at the Pyramids of Egypt. And the popularity of the stories of Herodotus and well known lists like the Seven Wonders in the ancient world, as well as the 14th Century's then contemporary fascination with the travels of Marco Polo, shows how interested people have always been with the wider world around them.

So that—as with the fantasy that somehow no married couple ever loved each other until the invention of chivalry in the 13th Century—this depiction of Petrarch is more a result of the modern era's ideological re-writing of history than it is a reflection of reality.

For although Petrarch did indeed emphasize the beauty and innate worth of developing one's artistic and other talents, he also emphasized that these were *God given* talents, and he saw their flowering as consistent with, and integral with, devotion to God. Which was hardly the 'humanism' that the term later came to mean by the late 18th Century. Nor was Petrarch the first to stress a positive side to religion, as against a supposed prevailing mood of original sin and almost certain damnation. Because for every Medieval passage that one can find talking about such depressing things, one can find many others praising God's love and mercy.

In fact, if you had been able to ask a Medieval churchman what Heaven was like, he would have

answered somewhat like an Eastern mystic, hypothesizing that it was a state of supreme grace, wherein the soul was absorbed back into God's light and consciousness. (By the way, our present conception that Heaven is a place where you met up again with your friends, relatives, and/or former pets, and/or has streets lined with gold, is a function of modernity and came about after the Protestant Reformation.)

But back to Petrarch. Significantly, his most important poems centered around his longing for, and pangs of separation from, his beloved 'Laura'. As with Dante's fixation upon 'Beatrice', scholars have concluded that this was a thinly veiled mystical allusion to the soul's separation from God. Much like those tales of the search for the Holy Grail or the troubadour songs from the previous century. So that it is important to understand that in the end Petrarch, supposedly the first 'modern' thinker, was actually much more connected to the High Middle Ages than he was any sort of break from it.

This would be a good time, though, to acknowledge that Sin was indeed a preoccupation of Medieval life. But that doesn't mean that the people back then necessarily thought of a long list of randomly accumulated do's and don't's. Rather the Seven Deadly Sins—pride, anger, greed, sloth, envy, lust, gluttony—were all seen as manifestations of the overarching human failing of, well, being human. This was summed up as the Idolatry of the Self. Self love. Which turns out to be remarkably similar to what was discussed in the last chapter. In other words, it was by succumbing to our self-ish desires to puff up our small 's' self (which was identified as our persona or ego) that we remained separated from the Lord (which was equated with the mystical Self and/or the Other).

And in the Middle Ages the absolute worst of these deadly, selfish sins was considered to be Greed. Avarice. The love of Mammon.

You'll remember that when the High Middle Ages began around the year 1000 virtually everyone took their Christian faith incredibly seriously. You'll also remember that during the Dark Ages it was the monasteries which had been the only centers of literacy, learning, and civilization. So that when the climate got warmer, when stability and peace slowly returned, and when all those technological innovations which I listed were starting to be used, then the good Christian noblemen and merchants who were now accumulating land and wealth started donating both of them in large quantities to those monasteries. Some of this was no doubt done out of guilt, some of it out of hoping for a better chance at Heaven, and some simply because the donors were so deeply religious.

Whatever the reason, however, now the Benedictines (who were the principal monastic order)—who had originally pledged themselves to a life of simplicity and poverty—soon became wealthy.

Instead of working by themselves in their vastly expanded fields, vineyards, and mills, now they hired others. Which made them even wealthier. Which tempted them to build finer churches, wear finer vestments, drink from finer chalices, etc.

But the prohibition against greed was still firmly etched into everyone's mind.

So that around the year 1100 the Cistercian movement, which was eventually led by a reformer named St. Bernard, who preached a return to utter simplicity and poverty, arose as a response to this. Now the well to do nobility and merchants, still highly Christian, were so impressed by this renewed religiosity that they donated even more land and money to this new order. The Cistercian monks, who only knew prayer and work, and who were also big users of new technologies and practices such as water mills and crop rotation, couldn't help but accumulate surplus. The result of which was that they, too, over time ended up with golden threads in their robes.

Then in 1220 came St. Francis and the Franciscans, who originally begged for each meal, and who originally didn't even want to own their personal begging bowls. This was followed over the centuries by the Dominicans and the Augustinians and the Jesuits, not to mention all the subsets and offshoots of the existing orders. Needless to say, the founding of each group was accompanied by new vows of poverty, simplicity and hard work.

But, as I said, in the Middle Ages it was the entire culture, not just the monks, which was both consumed with a vision of the spiritual life and concerned over sins like greed. Which is why, for instance, those craft guilds made sure that everyone earned the same amount. On the other hand, however, in the regular world it was no doubt a lot harder to ignore the siren call of wealth which would inevitably accumulate to sober, industrious workers if they weren't monks who had taken on those religious vows. And it was a lot easier to justify holding on to said wealth when one hadn't taken vows of celibacy and therefore had heirs and other family members to look after.

This same avoidance/approach happened with usury, which is the loaning of money for interest. Jesus had pretty clearly forbidden it, and the early Church had absolutely done so. For that matter, Aristotle had called it morally wrong. Mohammed had said that Muslims couldn't do it. And St. Thomas Aquinas had railed against usury in his philosophy.

But although the Torah had agreed that it was terrible for Jews to charge interest to fellow Jews, there was still a loophole which made it permissible to do so to 'strangers'. Which is why the Jews in the Middle Ages became the principle moneylenders and bankers. (And why there were roundly hated for it.)

By the 13th Century, though, what with the almost hundred years of peace, even more improvements, and greatly expanded trade with the rest of the world, it was getting harder and harder for people not to be avaricious. And the wealthiest places in the region, if not the world, were Venice and the other city-states in northern Italy. In such a situation it became much easier for moral codes to become conveniently bent and for usury to therefore find its Christian justification. And by the 14th Century the bankers and the movers and the shakers were now no longer Jewish, but rather Italian families like the Bardi, the Peruzzi, and the Albizzi.

So back to the dawn of the 15th Century. The rest of Europe was slowly regrouping and slowly regaining its population. And the Italian cities were getting richer and richer. Not, by the way, that the vast majority of the Italian population saw any of this. Peasants still remained dirt poor. (And no technologically savvy monks were there to help them improve their lot.) Social mobility probably decreased as the century wore on, with income inequality soaring. And the well off—the top 1%, as it were—kept trying to surpass each other in the amount and variety of luxury goods owned. Moral codes, already traditionally looser than those up North, became almost non-existent for those at the top of the heap.

Not a pretty picture. But if this reminder of these first stirrings of the capitalist spirit doesn't exactly warm your heart, then just wait. Because a brief survey of the political system back then might actually chill your blood.

Because although most all of the city-states of Northern Italy—Venice, Milan, Genoa, Florence, Siena, Verona—had all started out as representative republics modeled on pre-Empire Rome, and although Venice was pretty much able to retain this system, virtually all of the others rather quickly degenerated into places where two or three powerful families were constantly, viciously fighting each other. And when they weren't doing that they were viciously fighting with all the other city-states. Hiring mercenary armies to march back and forth. Literally backstabbing each other. Poisoning. Assassinating. Often within their own families.

The horrific stories of people with names like Sforza and Borgia may have been elaborated upon and exaggerated over the years. But not by that much. Because all in all this period is known for some of the most disgusting, immoral human behavior ever. Certainly in the history of Western Europe. Even the popes got into the act, building up their own armies, relentlessly expanding their papal territories, and using excommunication as a purely political tool. As an example of how decrepit

the system had become, consider that three different Borgias ended up also becoming popes.

So that when Machiavelli wrote 'The Prince' in 1494 he wasn't really being cynical. He was simply describing what had already been going on.

All of which clearly begs the question: *Why would anyone at any time admire anything at all about this era?*

But in the year 1407 a brilliant architect named Brunelleschi just happened to figure out how to create the illusion of seeming to paint a three dimensional picture upon a flat two dimensional surface. This new technique was called *perspective*, and it immediately changed the way visual art was created and appreciated. And now a revolution in painting had started. By the middle of the century Italian masters were surpassing all others in the depth and the complexity of their creations.

But who was going to support all of these artists and pay for their output? This is where the 'billionaires' of the time, that fabulously wealthy 1% of the Italian population, those ruling families (and, generally speaking, dictators) of the city-states, came in. And the wealthiest and most powerful of them all was the leading family of Florence, the Medicis. Owners of banks and factories and ships and you name it, they decided that the best way to parade their magnificence to the world was by being patrons of the arts. And so they splurged on castles and houses and churches and other public projects by hiring architects and sculptors and artists. Which is why today millions of tourists still flock to Florence.

The other city-states weren't slouches at this, either. Powerful Venice, after all, had been the place which had first set the style of flaunting wealth through buildings and art. Siena, Rome, Milan, all had patrons who competed to hire away the best artists from each other. But whereas the artistic energy in Northern Europe of the High Middle Ages had been concentrated solely on those astonishing cathedrals which praised the Lord, now artists were expected to also praise the *people* who were paying them. So now the subject matter started trending towards the personal and the human. Not the divine.

It's certainly true that no one can deny the brilliance of Italian art in the years 1425-1550. There was Botticelli, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian, plus any number of others that you (and I) probably haven't heard of. But in the context of this chapter the question that you need to ask yourself is: *How is art and architecture in and of itself any kind of benchmark about anything besides art and architecture?* Remember the extreme inequality of the period. The mindless love of luxury that resulted from that. The moral depravity. The viciousness of the politics. The endless wars. The

cynicism of Machiavelli. The Borgias (and later the Medicis) selecting themselves as popes.

Does any of that make you think of a Renaissance? Of the birth of a new, improved human? After all, what new, improved ideas were there of justice? Of equality? Of philosophy? Of anything other than paintings and statues and places to house them? How did the life of the average person improve in any way?

But perhaps the best way to see how essentially bankrupt this period of time in Northern Italy was is to quickly look at the life of the supposedly quintessential Renaissance man, Leonardo da Vinci.

We can start by affirming that Leonardo was indeed a profound genius, both in art and in what today would be called technical engineering. Although, to be balanced, one should also point out that he had no real talent or background in music, poetry, history, philosophy, or the classics, all endeavors in which the well rounded 'Renaissance' individual was expected to be proficient. Still in all, he was amazingly good at what he was good at.

But here are some other aspects of da Vinci which you might not be aware of. He spent an inordinate amount of time drawing and designing weapons of war. In fact, he spent most of his adult life trying to find people to hire him so that he could build and use them. To that end, he first worked for the Sforza family in Milan. Then for Cesare Borgia (whose name is still synonymous with evil). And finally for the only slightly less depraved Giuliano Medici. Spending his entire life with not a single relationship—or even friendship—with any female, he instead surrounded himself with beautiful young teenage male 'students' who had no particular skill in art. A man of big, fanciful ideas and schemes, he hardly finished any project, which is why there are only about fifteen of his paintings in the world today. By the end of his life there is no evidence that he had ever experienced any of the higher love talked about by Plato or other philosophers, let alone that of the Christians. When he died there was no deep wisdom or contentment in him. Only frustration with himself at his perceived failures.

One might respond that we are all imperfect humans. And to his credit Leonardo would have never put himself forward as some sort of superman, since he was all too painfully aware of all of those shortcomings. Moreover, one can certainly argue that some of those more degraded aspects of his life were more appropriately a function of the degraded society which he found himself in.

But that's the point. The fact that Jules Michelet coined the term 'Renaissance' 400 years later doesn't mean that the era actually was one. This pretense, much like the 19th Century lionization of Da Vinci, had much more to do with the desire to make worldliness and the rejection of religion look noble

and ancient than it had to do with honest history. If anything, what with its endless wars and betrayals, its greed and vanity, the 15th Century in Italy was much closer to death and degeneracy than it was to rebirth.

And if there wasn't any actual Renaissance in Italy, there certainly wasn't anything like a 'Northern Renaissance' in the rest of Europe, either. As already mentioned, it is true that as the 15th Century progressed in Northern Europe people adjusted to the cold, the population slowly rebounded, the economy improved, and technical improvements kept making work more efficient and productive. But all of this would have happened even if Italy had never existed.

In fact, while the Sforzas and the Borgias and the Medicis were killing each other in the 1480s, Prince Henry the Navigator in Portugal was studiously engaged in perhaps the most important development of the previous several centuries, namely the opening of the overseas trade routes to India and China. Which, incidentally, also signaled the end of Italy's monopoly of Asian trade, and started that country's long and steep economic decline.

And then, to top it off, Spain serendipitously discovered the New World.

Nor had Italy been the only home of writers or poets or mathematicians. Remember the story of Copernicus. He was Polish. The other savants whom he communicated with were scattered across the continent. The universities at Cambridge and Oxford, at Paris, and at various other cities had been going strong for hundreds of years. Whatever developments and changes of attitude which occurred in the North happened independently in the North, and not as a result of Italian influence. Even when it comes to art, although perspective was indeed invented in Florence, the first use of oil paints—an equally revolutionary development—was by Jan Van Eyck, a Flemish painter.

If anything, the rest of Europe was actually rather repulsed by the whole idea of Italy. To a large degree the papacy had degenerated. Nobody wanted to emulate the constant warring viciousness of the city-states; the feudal system that was morphing into stable, central authority was seen as far superior. The good citizens of the North were shocked by the moral depravity of the South. In fact, the German slang word for sodomite was 'someone from Florence'.

So although things were about to drastically change for the rest of Europe, it had little to do with those artists and tyrants and artist/tyrant/popes who were living their depraved lives in Rome and Milan.

Rather it had to do with one particular industrious, sober, hardworking German up north.

No, not Martin Luther.

Rather a guy named Johannes Gutenberg.

But that's for next time.

In the meantime, once again I would like to thank you once more for so far having listened.