

AMERICAN *Affairs*

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Virtue Signaling: Humanism and Politics

by Noel Malcolm

REVIEW ESSAY

Virtue Politics:

Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy

by James Hankins

Harvard University Press, 2019, 768 pages

Words, like books, have their fates, and the recent fate of the word “humanism” has been a strange one. Go to the website of the American Humanist Association (AHA)—mottos: “Good without a God”; “Advocating Progressive Values and Equality for Humanists, Atheists and Freethinkers”—and you will find it described as “an ethical and life-affirming philosophy free of belief in any gods and other supernatural forces.” You will also be told that humanism is “a worldview which says that reason and science are the best ways to understand the world around us.” Current concerns of the AHA include mitigating climate change, fighting for the rights of “secular wedding officiants,” and boycotting the Pledge of Allegiance until the words “under God” are removed from it.

Until this version of humanism rose to prominence in the mid-to-late twentieth century, the word was essentially a historical term. Among historians, it still is. It refers to a tradition of thought and practice, a cultural movement, which began in early Renaissance Italy, bloomed there in the fifteenth century, and spread also to many other parts of Western Christendom, exerting a deep influence on European

Noel Malcolm is a Senior Research Fellow at All Souls College, University of Oxford. He is the editor of Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan (Oxford, 2012) and the author of Useful Enemies: Islam and the Ottoman Empire in Western Political Thought, 1450–1750 (Oxford, 2019).

thought throughout the early modern period. Renaissance humanists did not generally use any version of the word “humanist” to describe themselves, but they did employ the phrase “*studia humanitatis*” to mean the study of ancient literature, history, and philosophy. And that was what lay at the heart of humanism: a passion for rediscovering the ancient Greek and Roman world, absorbing its values, and trying to apply them to the world of the present.

There were two big reasons why such a cultural project appealed to Italians above all. The first was that the signs of ancient greatness were still to be seen all around them, not only in Rome but in many other cities: temples, theatres, aqueducts, and so on. If you combined this sometimes overpowering physical evidence with the magisterial nature of the Roman law and the brilliance of so much Latin literature, a sense of contemporary cultural inferiority became almost unavoidable. The second reason was that politically, during this period, the Italian peninsula was a mess. Small towns and their territories had in many cases been taken over by rapacious signori or lords; many of these places—and some of those that had retained their communal governments—had in turn been gobbled up by more powerful rulers, such as the notorious Visconti family of Milan; but the peninsula as a whole remained heavily fractured between rival powers, with roving bands of mercenary fighters finding plenty of work to do. One could only dream about a return to the ancient *Pax Romana*, when a single great power, Rome, ruled not only the whole of Italy but huge swaths of Europe as well.

There can be nothing surprising, then, about the idea that Renaissance humanism had a political agenda. One famous interpretation, that of the German-American scholar Hans Baron, even coined a special term for the political program of the humanists. In a 1955 study focusing on Leonardo Bruni, a humanist intellectual who also held high political office in Florence in the first half of the fifteenth century, Baron described the birth of what he called “civic humanism.” By this he meant a program of active citizenship which appealed to the moral and political thought of Cicero and idealized the “republican” period of Roman history. Within an essentially republican constitutional framework, it prioritized the very secular goals of prosperity, territorial expansion, and glory; indeed, in Baron’s view, this “civic humanism” represented a decisive turn away from medieval, religiously based and monarchically inclined political

thought, moving instead, via Machiavelli a century later, to secularism, Enlightenment, and modernity.

Although Baron was a brilliant scholar and a persuasive writer, his theory did not remain intact for long. His historical scholarship was implausibly, almost bizarrely, precise. He located the birth of civic humanism in the period between June and September 1402, when the city of Florence braced itself for an invasion by Giangaleazzo Visconti; yet it was not difficult for other scholars to demonstrate that elements of Baron's "civic humanism" had been around for much of the previous century. At the same time, the idea that Leonardo Bruni's aggressive republicanism was typical of humanist political thought could not be sustained—not just because some writers with impeccable humanist credentials wrote strongly in favor of monarchy, but because an absolute majority did not exclusively commit themselves to any constitutional arrangement. The seemingly strong and intrinsic link between humanism and something called "the republican tradition" turned out to be a delusory one, an example (like so many characterizations of long-term "traditions") of retrospective wish fulfillment.

With the failure of this high-profile theory about the political significance of Renaissance humanism, some historians have been tempted to scale down their expectations. It seems less risky to go back to the older idea that humanism was essentially an educational movement, manifesting itself in grammar books, editions of classical texts, commentaries, and translations. Yes, some humanists did hold political office, or act as advisers to princes—indeed, some wrote exhortatory letters or even political treatises—but a man has to earn a living, and one thing that came easily to men trained in classical rhetoric was churning out great quantities of worthy-sounding advice, historical examples, and platitudinous generalizations.

PUTTING THE POLITICS BACK IN HUMANISM

James Hankins's *Virtue Politics* puts the politics back into humanism in an extraordinarily deep and far-reaching way. He does not deny that the whole cultural movement of humanism ranged much more broadly than any specific political project. Learning to write elegant Latin hexameters was not the conduct of politics by other means. Yet insofar as the humanist movement had a scheme of values which it promoted (as it clearly did), it was moral and social values that lay at

the heart of that scheme, not aesthetic or philological ones. Borrowing a Greek term, as adapted by a modern ethnologist, Hankins writes that Renaissance humanism represented a special *paideuma*, by which he means “an intentional form of elite culture that seeks power within a society with the aim of altering the moral attitudes and behaviors of the society’s members, especially its leadership class.” He notes too that a *paideuma* will typically produce “a *paideia*, a set of social technologies designed to alter minds and hearts, which constitute its soulcraft.” Education is a major element of such a *paideia*, but not the only one: for example, “humanist eloquence was meant as a kind of social technology, incentivizing good behavior through the use of praise and blame.”

Hence the title, and the master theme, of this book. Humanism was not purely political, as it promoted a much wider range of human values. But it believed that those values, if properly absorbed and internalized, could transform politics; and, what is more, it held that *only* such a revalorizing of human beings could have such a transformative effect in the political realm. The legal approach to politics, seeking to improve the state by revising its laws, was deemed worthless so long as the people—especially the ones administering those laws—lacked virtue. Constitutional change would, in itself, be similarly ineffective: republican governments could behave well or badly, just as there could be benign and oppressive monarchs, and the essential difference did not lie in the form of government itself. Virtue was not merely the *sine qua non*, the necessary cause of good politics; it was, if fully developed and practiced, the sufficient cause. And instilling virtue was the rationale of all political education and political counsel.

It would be an exaggeration to say that with this new characterization of Renaissance humanist political thought, everything falls suddenly into place. One reason for hesitating to make any such pronouncement is that there is nothing sudden about this. James Hankins, one of the world’s leading authorities on Italian humanism, has spent decades investigating and editing a mass of little-known textual material, much of it in Latin, and has produced a stream of shorter studies on many of the writers and topics dealt with in this book. This is certainly a landmark publication, bringing together and developing lines of interpretation that have been sketched out in a long sequence of masterly essays. But the experience of the reader,

therefore, is not that of stout Cortés, silent upon a peak in Darien, gazing at an unknown ocean for the first time; it's more like looking at a huge, authoritative, and impressively detailed map of a little-known continent, produced at last by a leading explorer whose sketch maps of its regions have been filling in our knowledge year by year.

The other reason for hesitation is that there is much more to this book than its master thesis. The basic concept of “virtue politics” illuminates the whole nature of humanist political thought, but it does so at a general level, taking the concept of “virtue” as abstractly as the humanist writers did themselves. Merely to adopt this perspective is not to make everything fall into place; there are too many other variables. And much of the interest of this book comes, in fact, from seeing just how various were the conclusions reached by humanist intellectuals on a wide range of topics.

Some principles were, admittedly, held by these writers almost universally. One intriguing example, highlighted by Hankins, is what he calls “virtue egalitarianism”—an equality principle which, as he points out, differs from all modern egalitarianisms, as it accepts most kinds of actual inequality while insisting that human beings are equal in their capacity for virtue. Closely tied to this was a principle of meritocracy: because virtue was attainable by people of the lowest birth, it was right that virtue, not birth status, should be the key criterion for office. (This principle operated only as a preference, however, not as a justification for social revolution: since humanists accepted actual inequalities as given, their typical response to noble office-holding was not to eject the nobles, but to seek to educate them.)

Even on this basic point, however, the agreement among humanist thinkers was not quite universal. A few, including Leonardo Bruni, did explicitly accept the idea that virtue, or at least an especially strong tendency towards it, was inherited—not by a noble caste, but by ancient Romans and their modern descendants. This was a way of explaining the exceptional achievements of the ancients, while also supplying a flattering kind of encouragement to present-day cities such as Florence that had foundation myths linking them with Rome.

The general assumption, nevertheless, was that people were led toward virtuous behavior by two things: exhortation and example. The latter had a special importance in the political realm, as it reinforced the need for princes and civic leaders to be virtuous

themselves: not only would they make better laws and policies, but they would also raise the moral tone of the population. Yet here too there was room for some disagreement. The hard-line view, that it was simply the personal conduct of the rulers that mattered, was not held by all; some writers (Bruni again, and also Francesco Filelfo, a scholar of ancient Greece who wrote pathbreaking works about Sparta) argued that good laws and good institutions were needed in order to promote virtue among the population.

THE QUESTION OF EMPIRE

On one other important issue Leonardo Bruni also appears untypical. While almost any writer brought up on a diet of classical literature would treat “fame” or “glory” as positive terms, Bruni emphasized that the highest form of glory was the kind won by states that expanded by means of territorial conquest. As he wrote: “I am moved by the things that men hold to be goods: extending borders, enlarging empire, raising on high the glory and splendor of the state.” Bruni even seems to have thought that the attainment of such glory was the ultimate rationale for instilling virtue in the people. Few other humanists went as far as that, and many strongly disagreed. “It is in peacetime,” warned the Sieneese philosopher Francesco Patrizi, “that humanistic studies and true virtues find their theater of praise, while in war madness rules and triumph proceeds from blood and slaughter.” Like many humanists, Patrizi argued for reliance on a citizen militia as opposed to a force of hired mercenaries; the militiamen would of course be inspired by patriotic virtue, but their role would be essentially defensive, not aggressive.

How, then, did these thinkers deal with the fact that the ancient power they most strongly admired, Rome, had devoted blood and treasure to accumulating a huge territorial empire? To some, such as the scholar Lorenzo Valla, it seemed obvious that spreading Latin culture was a much greater Roman achievement than extending an empire. To others, such as the papal official and classical historian Biondo Flavio (whose huge study of Roman civilization, *Roma triumphans*, Hankins compares in significance to Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*), the Roman Church now performed, at a higher, spiritual level, the supranational role of the ancient Roman Empire, so that the need to restore a terrestrial empire had simply fallen away. And for at least one original thinker, the Greek immigrant George of Trebizond,

the key to the success of Roman imperialism was not the process of conquest, but the open, cosmopolitan attitude of the Romans towards the peoples they incorporated into their empire.

WHAT WAS HUMANIST VIRTUE?

That reference to the Church by Biondo Flavio alerts us to a rather elephantine presence in the room. Where did Christianity, with its distinctive set of values and its special claims to authority (of a kind that was, in this period, highly active in the political realm) fit into this neo-Roman or neoclassical worldview? As Hankins explains, the founding father of the humanist movement, the poet Petrarch, had seen no clash between these value systems. On the contrary, “Adapting ideas of Christian *reformatio* worked out by the Church Fathers, Petrarch thought of his new *paideuma* as a revival of the human character in its uncorrupt ancient form, including the humanity of primitive Christianity.” But Petrarch’s attempts to import his classical values into the world of contemporary politics were painfully unsuccessful; his preference, in the end, was for preserving one’s personal virtue by withdrawing from the corrupt world of military and political action.

Most humanists did not go down that path. As the very concept of virtue politics implies, engagement in the secular world was dictated by their entire system of values. Hankins notes that generally they sensed no contradiction between that system and the one found in theological treatises. “They did not challenge the Church as an institution or its teachings about the eternal destiny of the human soul. They saw their own classical lessons as supplementary to those of the Church, preparing the young and supporting adults in their earthly roles in this life.” This is understandable in human, biographical terms, of course: Flavio was a papal secretary, Valla was a priest, Filelfo even became a bishop. But did it make sense in theoretical terms? Wasn’t there a degree of “cognitive dissonance” at work here, as they remained pious Christians while developing a scheme of human values derived almost exclusively from the pagan world?

There was nothing novel about the general idea that Christian theology bestows on us a higher layer of values, known by revelation and relating to eternal felicity, while human reason can work out the practical values that relate to our earthly existence. Thomas Aquinas had established such a two-tier system, and had drawn heavily on a

pagan philosopher, Aristotle, in elaborating the values of the lower tier. But the system was still a continuous, ascending one, in which the values of the human level were fully consonant with Christian moral theology. The two parts of the system were distinct, but not compartmentalized; the human realm was human, but not autonomous. Pagan virtues were allowed when they were compatible with Christian values, but otherwise they must be either Christianized or dismissed.

Indeed, there is nothing to suggest that this broad Thomist framework was rejected by the humanists; they were certainly not radical theologians developing an alternative scheme. And yet the whole nature of their approach to moral values involved turning their backs on Christian moral theology and concentrating on a pre-Christian past. To talk of cognitive dissonance is to imply that they were unaware of any contradiction, and this may well have been the case. If so, a large part of the explanation may be that although they were fixated on virtue cultivation, they said remarkably little about the precise nature of those virtues. To the modern reader, at least, this sometimes feels like the hole at the heart of the system; while it would be anachronistic to expect the humanists to have engaged in modern analytic moral philosophy, one might expect them to have subjected the contents of justice or courage or liberality to the sort of probing questioning that they found in Aristotle or Plato. Yet in most cases they seem to have been satisfied by bland listings of abstractions: a letter from the famous educational theorist Guarino of Verona, for example, contents itself with commending “justice, goodness, prudence and modesty . . . affability and mercy.”

For some thinkers, however, the dissonance must have been harder to ignore. One has to wonder: did Leonardo Bruni ever ask himself whether elevating the glory of military conquest to the highest level of human valuation was really compatible with Christian ethics? But there is one writer, situated at the far end of the “long fifteenth century” discussed in this book, for whom the clash with traditional religious values was sonorous and entirely conscious: Machiavelli. His distaste for the Christian principles of humility, forgiveness, obedience, and turning the other cheek was strongly expressed, and this was one of the things that turned him into a loathsome figure for generations of orthodox political thinkers.

Was Machiavelli a “virtue politics” theorist? Not at all. Where the essential requirements of politics were concerned, he was as much an enemy of the mainstream humanist position as he was of the Christian one. There are good reasons, however, why Hankins ends his book with an extended discussion of Machiavelli’s ideas. For most nonspecialists, when any mention is made of Italian Renaissance political thought, Machiavelli is the first name that will enter their heads. And for too many specialists, as Hankins has noted throughout the book, this one writer has had a strangely magnetic effect on their approach to the century before him, as they have tried to line up the thinkers of the quattrocento on “the road that leads to Machiavelli.” (Hans Baron was guilty of this; as it happens, his idea that Bruni pointed in a Machiavellian direction was not entirely mistaken, but it was a large mistake to portray Bruni as the archetypal humanist thinker when he was, on key points, very much an outlier.)

One might think it impossible to say anything significantly new and illuminating about a figure such as Machiavelli, on whom literally hundreds of books have been written. Yet it is one of the many achievements of this volume that Hankins does exactly that; as these powerful and incisive final chapters show, it is only when we have appreciated what Machiavelli was arguing against that we can fully understand what he was arguing for.

VIRTUE POLITICS VERSUS INSTITUTIONS

One closes this book with all the feelings that arise from reading great works of history: a sense of the sheer strangeness of the past; the satisfaction of gaining a rich idea of its variety and particularity, and of how different people reacted to circumstances in very different ways; but at the same time the intellectual excitement of seeing how some overarching ideas and principles, when carefully drawn out of the past itself, can make real sense of it. Yet since the primary subject matter here consists of ideas about human beings on the one hand, and politics on the other, it may not seem unreasonable to ask whether there are any lessons for the present.

Here and there in the text, almost teasingly, Hankins has hinted that some lessons could be drawn; in his final pages he briefly sketches what they might be. Politics as a mere mechanism for juggling conflicting interests is not enough. Politics as mere legalism is not enough, no matter how important the abstract principles of a rule

of law may be. “Some agreement,” Hankins argues, “about what constitutes decent and moral behavior is surely necessary to build the trust required for personal freedom and moderate rule in large-scale, multi-ethnic societies.” And again: “Those in power need to be shaped by education and culture to understand, respect, and even love their political opponents as well as powerless people under their care.”

We can all agree that both a society and a political culture need some elements of shared morality, and that the state-as-mere-mechanism will not supply, or account for, all the aspects of our relationship with it—such as true patriotism—that are bearers of fundamental value. In these ways virtues are of course important, and the Roman virtue of *pietas*, a respect for those who have gone before us and made us the way we are, may also have a special role to play.

Yet still I would hesitate to call for the revival of anything calling itself “virtue politics.” That phenomenon, as described in this book, put such an emphasis on the transformative power of virtue in the ruling class that it downgraded or simply rejected the importance of many other things that matter: constitutions, institutions, laws. Proper respect for these, and the values they embody, should also form part of our public moral world.

In a postscript to his account, Hankins presents a comparison between the virtue politics of his humanists and the moral-political-cultural program of Confucianism. That program lasted for many centuries in Imperial China, and no doubt contributed to stability and civility in many aspects of ordinary life. Historically, the similarities between the two systems are rich and fascinating. But Confucianism was very much a system for the premodern world. One has only to look at the present-day project of the Chinese regime to instill “correct” values in its population by means of increasingly invasive forms of socio-technological control to see how things have changed. There are two obvious problems here. The first is that when virtue is claimed as the end, almost anything may be said to be justified as the means. And the second is contained in the simple question: “Whose virtue?”

In Western societies, there is no shortage of people who would answer “Mine,” claiming to represent a higher virtue of a supra-political kind. It is no accident that in the last decade the term “virtue-signaling” has become an essential part of our vocabulary. Too often,

virtuousness is framed in terms of respect for special rights—rights which are animated by grievance and resentment, and the satisfaction of which requires encroachment on some of the most basic principles on which a decent polity is founded, such as freedom of action within the law and equal treatment under it. The idea that the ordinary values of the political world can always be “trumped” by rights involves, to be sure, a kind of moralizing very far removed from the virtue politics of fifteenth-century Italy. But I fear that it gives us a better idea of where virtue politics might end up, if any far-reaching attempt were made to revive it in the twenty-first century.

Let us put our present problems to one side. This book is, after all, a work not of political advocacy but of historical scholarship. It is a monumental study, written with grace and clarity and immense but lightly worn learning. For generations to come, all who write about the political thought of Italian humanism will have to refer to it; its influence will be—like that of virtue itself in the theories of the authors it studies—nothing less than transformative. ^A