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## Why we need to lose 'the Renaissance' as a means of periodization

An analysis of the pros and cons based on historical theory

The concept of the Renaissance can be very insightful for examining the use of concepts in history. Its meaning has been in 'a permanent flux' since the invention of the term in the sixteenth century, historians have argued about the usefulness (or harmfulness) of the concept since the 1900's, and it has influenced the periodization of history in a fundamental way. In this paper I want to argue that we need to lose the concept of 'the Renaissance' as a means of periodization and use a different, more proper definition.

### The pros and cons of using concepts in history

Before analyzing the historiography of the concept of the Renaissance and presenting my suggestions for its future use, I will first give a brief evaluation of the discussion in the area of historical theory on the use of historical concepts in general. When we have a clear image of the benefits and disadvantages attached to using these concepts, it will be possible to apply these to the concept of the Renaissance in particular, later.

The main reason why historians began to create concepts is their explanatory function. British philosopher W.H. Walsh (1913-1986) was the first to use the term 'colligation' to explain the construction of concepts in history. In his book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (1958) Walsh defined colligation as 'the procedure of explaining an event by tracing its intrinsic relations to other events and locating it in its historical context'.<sup>1</sup> Particular events are placed inside a context of related circumstances and

grouped under a general concept, which defines the character of a certain historical process or period. This explanatory process works two ways, since the general explains the unique, and in collecting all these similar events under a particular title we create a whole that is more than just the sum of its parts. However, this explanatory function also has a predictable downside. We as historians have a retrospective view, we already know the outcome of historical events, and therefore our interpretation of specific events can become teleological.<sup>2</sup> Narrative concepts that give an overview of an historical process can make us biased towards the particular events happening in that period. As Frank Ankersmit stated, 'our knowledge and our ideas of the past are largely channeled by narrative concepts.'<sup>3</sup> For example, when you designate the religious history of a certain period with the concept 'Reformation', you might come to see that period as a consistent unit in time, and interpret every religious event happening in that period as part of it, even though people who lived at that time might not have seen it that way.

Another theoretical side note to the use of concepts in history, argued by Frank Ankersmit, is the fact that narrative substances have no connection to past reality, and that there is nothing actually present in the historical past to which something like 'the decline of the church' or 'the Enlightenment' can refer. This seems to be in opposition to, for example, a statement like 'Hitler died in 1945'; an event that did actually happen in a past reality. However, as Ankersmit points out, if we only base our historical writing on statements like these and avoid using all narrative substances and 'images of the past', that will not necessarily make our history more truthful or objective. According to the narrative realists, the most objective narrations are the ones that are as disorganized as the past itself, an incoherent collection of particular statements that has 'neither heart nor kernel'. But if a narration does not have a narrative core, a certain image of the past, then there is nothing to either confirm or falsify.<sup>4</sup> If you only use statements like 'king Louis XVI was beheaded' and 'the Bastille was besieged', there is not much to be found 'false' about them, but they are not very helpful to our knowledge about the past either, since you don't interpret those events at all. Whereas when you place these events under a 'narrative substance' like the French Revolution, it is both more explanatory and objective, since only a few historical facts are needed to falsify this image of the past.<sup>5</sup>

Another point of criticism regarding the use of concepts in history is

the danger of anachronism, a point addressed by D. Timothy Goering in his article defending the relevance of conceptual history. From the perspective of conceptual history one of the most important things for any historian is being aware of the differences in the meaning of our own modern concepts and of those same concepts in the past. When we apply a concept like 'liberalism' to eighteenth century political thinkers, we have to make sure we don't project our own modern connotations of that term on eighteenth century ideas. Goering states that it might even be better to 'avoid using contemporary terms for past realities and rather trace the exact terms and concepts that people used to describe their own reality.'<sup>6</sup> Cecare Cuttica, however, takes an entirely different stance on this subject in his 2012 paper 'What type of historian?'. According to Cuttica the main task of every historian is to use the past in order to learn more about our own modern society. Historians have to establish a dialogue with the past in which they rethink the relation between the 'self' and the 'other', and it is therefore more important to avoid distance and unfamiliarity with that past than to avoid anachronism. Using modern concepts to interpret historical events and 'being creative' can make us see connections that we otherwise would not have noticed and can simultaneously teach us more about the past and about our own society.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most important benefits of using concepts in history is their ability to transfer knowledge. Ankersmit emphasized the fact that 'the cognitive force of narrative concepts outweighs by far that of statements on actions and peculiarities of individual persons.'<sup>8</sup> Factual statements like 'the steam engine was invented by James Watt' are less important to our knowledge of history than the general historical process known as the Industrial Revolution. They are also way more effective in transferring that knowledge since, as D. Goering stated, 'rendering experiences intelligible is only made possible by the success of using concepts.'<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, however, the cognitive force of concepts is reduced by their tendency to constantly change their meaning. Every historical work adds new connotations to a concept, and therefore when we talk of something like the Industrial Revolution, we cannot be sure if by using that word, we are talking about the same thing. This 'permanent flux' is further complicated by the fact, mentioned by C. Behan McCullagh, that the interpretation of some colligatory concepts keeps getting stretched to match an increasing number of historical events. The further you stretch those concepts, the

more general they get, and the less knowledge they actually contain. Like McCullagh said: 'the intention of words like 'enlightenment' and 'renaissance' varies inversely with their extension: the more periods they are applied to, the less information they convey'.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there are the practical benefits of using concepts while doing historical research. Our knowledge of narrative substances and images of the past helps us to know what to look for in the overwhelming collection of available primary data. Distinguishing historical processes like 'the Reformation' and 'the Renaissance' guides us in focusing our research, and presenting a study on a fixed subject, instead of producing a book with 'a list of historical facts about the sixteenth century'. Of course, this tendency to draw our attention to certain aspects also has a considerable downside, since they can make someone (unintentionally) disregard other aspects that could be just as interesting. Another scenario is that a particular narrative substance completely colors your frame of reference in such a way that you can no longer look objectively at a certain period in time. Every historical event you come across you will interpret through this specific concept, and events that don't comply with this idea of what happened you will either ignore or twist in such a way as to make them fit your viewpoint. According to some historians this is exactly what happened with the concept of the Renaissance.

### Historiography of the Renaissance as a concept

The *Begriffsgeschichte* of 'the Renaissance' started with the fifteenth century Italian humanists, who came to see their own period as a break with the Dark Ages before them. This new age witnessed a classical revival of the art and literature of antiquity that had long been lost in this dark middle period. In the sixteenth century the terms '*rinascita*' and 'renaissance' were first used in this context, and during the eighteenth century writers began to associate 'the Renaissance' not only with a revival in arts and literature but with a progress of the human mind in general, English historians emphasizing the political and socio-economic aspects.<sup>11</sup> This increasingly broad interpretation of the concept of the Renaissance continued in the nineteenth century, when instead of speaking of a '*renaissance des beaux arts*' or '*renaissance des lettres*', people started using the general term 'Renaissance'.<sup>12</sup> The French historian Jules Michelet was the first to present 'the Renaissance' as a distinct

period in time, but he limited it to the sixteenth century in France.<sup>13</sup> With Jacob Burckhardt's fundamental work *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) a fixed definition of the concept of the Renaissance was created that was adopted by historians and, at least until 1900, remained unchallenged. Burckhardt defined 'the Renaissance' as a distinct period from the beginning of the fourteenth until the beginning of the sixteenth century, distinguished by its spirit of individualism and modernism.<sup>14</sup>

During the course of the twentieth century an elaborate discussion about the meaning and utility of the concept of the Renaissance took place, moving from 'the revolt of the medievalists' in the first decades, to a 'victory of the Renaissancists' in the fifties, and a renewed suspicion of the concept under the influence of the *Annales* school and social history in the sixties and seventies.<sup>15</sup> The collection of papers included in the 2005 book *Palgrave Advances in Renaissance Historiography*, edited by Jonathan Woolfson, represents the current state of affairs by allowing a number of historians with different specializations to present their ideas about the subject. These papers show us that there is neither consensus about the exact definition of the concept nor about its usefulness, these differences of opinion depending greatly on the area of study.

According to these papers, most art historians and religious historians still view the concept of the Renaissance from the Burckhardtian perspective, as a distinct period in time for art and religion, seeing that this picture of the past fits their subject matter well. Socio-economic, gender and political historians also tend to use the notion of the Renaissance as a period, but in neither of these fields are the historians entirely sure about its utility to their subject matter. Most historians of science and of literature have abandoned the idea of the Renaissance as a distinct period and rather see it as a cultural movement. William Caferro, writing his book *Contesting the Renaissance* anno 2010, states that while research on 'the Renaissance' is once again flourishing; the old problems of periodization and definition still persist. The revisionism of the seventies has not lead to consensual scholarship, as many historians still use traditional interpretations, or refuse to commit to any definition at all. Amongst different historians, four strategies exist for dealing with the concept in the future.

First of all, there are those historians who argue to go back to using the term in the pre-Burckhardtian manner, as a cultural movement in which a revival of classical art and learning took place. Robert Black, for instance,

states that it is useless to see 'the Renaissance' as a 'chronological block', since the political, social and cultural events that happened from fourteen hundred to sixteen hundred are way too diverse and complicated to see them as connected under some distinct spirit.<sup>16</sup> Randolph Starn, likewise, in his article 'Renaissance Redux' (1998) stated that we should see it as 'a movement of practices and ideas to which specific groups and identifiable persons variously responded in different times and places' and 'a network of diverse, sometimes converging, sometimes conflicting cultures, not a single, time-bound culture'.<sup>17</sup>

Some historians think that if we return to the original meaning of 'the Renaissance' as a cultural movement, we should simultaneously globalize the concept. The most important advocate for this course is Peter Burke. According to him we need to detach the idea of the Renaissance from the 'grand narrative of the progress of western civilization'. Not only were there other periods in which similar classical revivals took place (such as the Carolingian and Twelfth Century renaissances), but similar renaissances can be found in civilizations beyond Western Europe, such as China.<sup>18</sup>

Another group of historians considers the whole concept of the Renaissance obsolete and misleading and wants to discard it altogether. Many of these historians are medievalists who want to break the, according to them, arbitrary barrier between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, since many 'Renaissance elements' can be found in the Middle Ages, and vice versa. These historians are especially concerned with the tendency of the concept to produce teleological and biased interpretations of historical events. A recent contribution was made by Jacques le Goff in his book *Must We Divide History Into Periods?* in which he argued against the alleged novelty of 'the Renaissance' and for replacing it with the long term development of a 'long Middle Ages' extending from late antiquity to the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, there are those historians who want to keep using the concept of the Renaissance as a means of periodization. One of them is Wallace Ferguson, who takes a pragmatic stance in this discussion by arguing that 'there are, in fact, valid, logical objections to any form of periodization.' According to him, even if the historical image of 'the Renaissance' does not fit all the facts, and has been stretched and adjusted multiple times, no generally accepted alternative exists so we should keep using it as a working hypothesis.<sup>20</sup> That the argument for keeping the Renaissance as a period

has kept its advocates even after the revisionist debates, can be seen in the introductions of two recent collections of essays on ‘the Renaissance.’<sup>21</sup>

### Suggestions for future use of the concept of the Renaissance

Let us now apply the pros and cons of using concepts voiced by historical theorists to the concept of the Renaissance in particular to try and determine which aspect outweighs the other: its necessity or its harmfulness.

As I see it, in the case of its explanatory function versus its teleological tendency, the latter outweighs the former. The fact that ‘the Renaissance’ is a conveniently comprehensive concept which connects a number of different events is less important than its tendency to color our findings by seeing everything in the light of the outcome. For instance, while interpreting Petrarch’s description of his climb of Mont Ventoux (ca. 1336) we are tempted to see this as the start of a new appreciation of nature (a ‘Renaissance aspect’ voiced by Burckhardt), when we actually need to view this event in its own context. Therefore, the concept’s tendency to make historians over-interpret certain events outweighs its explanatory function.

The fact that the concept of the Renaissance, like all other concepts, has no actual connection to past reality (in contrast to simple factual statements) seems to be of less importance than the fact that it presents us with an image of the past that is easy to confirm or falsify. Like Ankersmit said, it is better to give a highly disputable picture of the past, than to not interpret past events at all. ‘The Renaissance’ in particular is a concept that can be used to inspire debate. One only needs to point to the survival of certain ‘medieval’ traditions to falsify this interpretation of events in favor of another ‘narrative substance’.

In the debate inspired by *Begriffsgeschichte* on using words that were not used by people in the past themselves, the proponents for using contemporary terms while writing history argue for the importance of establishing a dialogue with the past and avoiding the feeling of distance in order to learn from the past. However, this mainly regards words of contemporary societal value, such as ‘freedom’ or ‘sexuality’, whereas the contemporary word ‘renaissance’ when it is used beyond the area of (art) historical research simply means ‘rebirth’. As this has nothing to do with either a revival of classical antiquity or ‘Renaissance society’ in general, the value of this argument seems to be lost. The argument of the opponents

however, the danger of anachronism, is relevant. The term '*rinascita*' and 'renaissance' were only used from the sixteenth century onwards, so applying it to the previous two centuries could be rather anachronistic, just as using it for the sixteenth century beyond its connection to the arts.

Moving on to the next argument of the proponents of using concepts: its cognitive force and ability to transfer knowledge. In my opinion, the fact that the concept of the Renaissance has been in a 'permanent flux' since the very beginning is the exact reason why it is not able to transfer knowledge effectively. How can we use a concept to explain past events when so many different definitions of this concept exist? It has been used to indicate a tradition in the arts, a broad cultural movement, or a period of which the delineation varies, and it has been stretched to match an increasing number of events. The lack of consensus impairs the value of using it.

Lastly, I would like to discuss the benefits of 'the Renaissance' in focusing our research versus its tendency to color our frame of reference. While being confronted with this opposition, I don't think many historians would choose the former over the latter. However, since the concept of the Renaissance is so attractive in its comprehensiveness, we are still tempted to interpret all events, artworks, and literature from this perspective, leading us to miss or even consciously neglect aspects that don't agree with this image of the past.

To conclude our evaluation, which aspect is more important: the necessity of the Renaissance as a concept, or its harmfulness? To my mind, in the way the concept is currently used, the disadvantages outweigh the benefits. It entices us to give a teleological and biased interpretation of the past, it is anachronistic, and the fact that its definition is in a 'permanent flux' impedes its ability to transfer knowledge effectively. However, we cannot deny the supremacy of the explanatory power of 'the Renaissance' over listing an accumulation of past events, personas and artworks, nor how it gives us a comprehensive image of the past that is both easy to confirm and falsify, and which inspires debate. Moreover, even though it does not exactly point to past reality, the concept is of course not completely groundless: there is a reason why 'the Renaissance' has been such a popular representation of events, since it often fits our findings. Therefore, to discard it altogether, as some historians would argue, seems unwarranted to me.

Instead, I propose to keep using the concept, after dealing with the two complications that to me are the cause of all problems. First of all, to benefit its explanatory function and ability to transfer knowledge effectively, we

need to find a consensus in using the concept, establishing a clear definition. Secondly, to ward off its teleological, biased and anachronic tendencies, we need to lose the function of 'the Renaissance' as a means of periodization.

In my view, 'the Renaissance' cannot properly be used as a method of periodization in the study of history. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are neither the end of an era nor the beginning of a new one, but a transitional period in which life was influenced both by cultural factors we deem 'medieval' and by those we deem 'renaissance'.<sup>22</sup> The rebirth of classical antiquity did not dominate every aspect of society since it was primarily a cultural movement, nor did its impact on cultural life exclude the survival of other literary, artistic, or scientific traditions. Of course, we are aware that dividing history into periods will always be arbitrary, and no modern historian will think that with the Fall of Constantinople everyday life changed overnight. The fact remains, however, that these period-names carry certain connotations with them that make us see past events in a certain light. This is even more evident with the distinction between 'the Renaissance' and 'the Middle Ages', the first always associated with progress, the latter with backwardness.

In my argument for losing the Renaissance as a mode of periodization I agree with Jacques le Goff's work *Must We Divide History Into Periods?* However, our perspectives differ on the solution to the main question of his work. Jacques le Goff believed that historians should use a different periodization, based on long term developments, proposing a 'long Middle Ages' from late antiquity until the eighteenth century, whereas I believe we don't need periodization at all.

Practicing historical research based solely on centuries, avoiding terms like Middle Ages and Renaissance, is preferable for two reasons. First of all, even though concepts can prove to be very useful tools in the process of giving meaning to the past, the explanatory function of these concepts of periodization is less important than the danger of its teleological, biased and anachronistic tendencies. Furthermore, discarding the sharp distinctions of periodization can make it much easier to keep track of the *longue durée*, the long term developments.<sup>23</sup> Analyzing the continuation of different cultural traditions overtime, and the coexistence of these traditions, is far more important than assuming that one cultural tradition defined an entire period.

In the case of 'the Renaissance' my suggestion would be to go back to its original use as a cultural movement, and to use it to define those events

that altogether make up the long term development of the reoccurrence of classical antiquity in European intellectual and artistic culture. This long term development started around the twelfth century, and became increasingly important from the fourteenth century onwards, but did not define everything that was going on. When we define the concept this way it becomes easier for historians of different specializations to use it, because they don't have to subscribe all the connotations attached to 'the Renaissance period'. An historian of politics or science can use the concept of the Renaissance as 'the revival of classical antiquity' just as much as an historian of art or literature, by seeing it as a cultural movement that defined a certain aspect of their research period, instead of a concept that is supposed to define their subject entirely.

Even though this is a plea for expanding the concept of the Renaissance as a movement that embraces a far greater time span than in its original use, I will not go as far as Peter Burke by advocating the globalization of the concept to fit an infinite number of other times and places. Overstretching a concept to match an increasing number of historical events will deteriorate its value, leaving the word rather meaningless in the end.<sup>24</sup> By solely using the concept Renaissance to contextualize those events related to the revival of classical antiquity in Europe, it keeps its own distinguished characteristics, whereas when we include the revival of different antiquities with their own characteristics in other cultural spheres, we lose the significance of the European 'Renaissance', and that which made it stand out for historians in the first place.

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## Notes

1. W.H. Walsh called these concepts 'colligatory concepts', which Frank Ankersmit replaced with the term 'narrative substance' that emphasizes the narrative function of these concepts as an 'image of the past' and their sole existence as a linguistic device, instead of a past reality, more clearly. See: Frank Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1983).
2. Harry Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 52.
3. Ankersmit, 177.
4. Idem, 255. Following Ankersmit, I am using the term '*narratio*' to signify any image of the past created by historians based on their interpretation of past events.
5. Keith Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 105-106.

6. D. Timothy Goering, "Concepts, History and the Game of Giving and Asking for Reasons: A Defense of Conceptual History," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 7, vol. 3 (2013): 451.
7. Cesare Cuttica, "What Type of Historian? Conceptual History and the History of Concepts: A Complex Legacy and a Recent Contribution," *History and Theory* 51 vol. 3 (2012): 420-421.
8. Ankersmit, 177.
9. Goering, 428.
10. C. Behan McCullagh, "Colligation and Classification in History," *History and Theory* 17 vol. 3 (1978): 281.
11. The most influential work that has been published on the historiography of 'the Renaissance' until now is Wallace K. Ferguson's *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Comp., 1948). The previous summary has been based on pages 25-28, 65, 75-76, 90 and 101-102.
12. This term was naturalized in France by 1830, in Germany in the 1840's and ca. 1845 in England.
13. Summary based on: Ferguson, *The Renaissance*, 144-145, 154-155, 177-178.
14. Ferguson, 194-238.
15. For an overview of this debate, see for instance: William J. Bouwsma, "The Renaissance and the drama of Western history," *American Historical Review* 84 vol. 1 (1979): 2 and John Jeffries Martin, "Introduction. The Renaissance: Between Myth and History," in *The Renaissance: Italy and Abroad*, ed. John Jeffries Martin (London: Routledge, 2003), 10.
16. Robert Black, "The Renaissance and Humanism: Definitions and Origins," in *Palgrave Advances in Renaissance Historiography* ed. Jonathan Woolfson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 98.
17. Randolph Starn, "Renaissance Redux," *The American Historical Review* 103 vol. 1 (1998): 122-124.
18. Peter Burke, "Renaissance Europe and the world," in *Palgrave Advances in Renaissance Historiography* ed. Jonathan Woolfson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 52-70: 64. Peter Burke makes a similar argument in his book *The Renaissance* (London: Longmans, 1964). Compare especially "Chapter 8: Renaissance and Renascences – Some Perspectives".
19. Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History Into Periods?*, trans. Malcolm DeBevoise (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
20. Ferguson, *The Renaissance*, X, 393.
21. John Jeffries Martin ed., *The Renaissance: Italy and Abroad* (London: Routledge, 2003). Martin presents the Renaissance as a period of rapid and complex change. See also: G. Ruggiero ed., *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). Ruggiero presents the Renaissance as a *period* that still has characteristics that set it apart from other times, and argues that these types of periodizations 'offer some of the best broad knowledge that we have'.
22. However, this 'transitional' characteristic does not warrant separating the Renaissance as a distinct period, since all centuries are in a way transitional, and since in doing

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so we would assume that the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period surrounding the Renaissance are two separate blocks, which they are not.

23. In using the term '*longue durée*' I simply mean the history of long term developments in a broad sense. It will be easier to keep track of long term developments, like the revival of classical antiquity, if we stop writing about 'fixed periods'. I by no means think that historians should replace micro history in favor of a long term world history.
24. To my mind, this also happened to Le Goff's construction of the 'long Middle Ages', stretching this concept so far that it became meaningless in the end. If it has so little explanatory value, then why have this period in the first place?