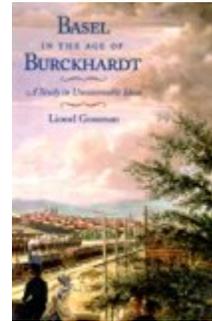


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lionel Gossman. *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: A Study in Unseasonable Ideas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 608 S. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-30498-4.

Reviewed by Angela Schwarz (Department of History, University of Duisburg)  
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## Genii loci

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High season for “unseasonable ideas”: Last year a number of books were published on Jacob Burckhardt and his contribution to nineteenth-century thought. The first two volumes of a new complete edition of his works are now available.[1] Since Burckhardt virtually stopped writing for publication after returning to Basel in 1858, both volumes contain studies that had to be put together from lecture notes or papers and were first published after his death in 1897. This applies to his famous *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (English translation in 1943: *Reflections on History*) as well as the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (partial English translation in 1963: *History of Greek Culture*), both in volume 10 of the complete works. In addition, the Swiss scholar and his ideas have recently again become the object of study of historians and art historians. Two of them have chosen a specific aspect of Burckhardt’s thinking as the focus of their analysis. John Hinde considers the way the Swiss historian discovered the aesthetic in history as a reaction towards the modern world.[2] Thomas Howard concentrates on the effects of theology on Burckhardt—who had started out as a student of theology, only to turn away from it and towards the study of history with Ranke, the young Gustav Droysen and others in Berlin as well as Friedrich Welcker and Heinrich von Sybel in Bonn.[3]

Friedrich Meinecke once suggested it might be well worth the effort to compare eminent German-speaking historians and philosophers of the nineteenth century from Basel and Berlin—he listed Burckhardt, Bachofen,

Nietzsche, Overbeck for Basel and Ranke, Droysen, Treitschke and Dilthey for the Prussian capital and to do so in light of the influence exerted on them by their “historical backgrounds and contexts,” i.e., the spirit culminated in these two cities. Hinde and Howard go some way in depicting effects Burckhardt’s native Basel had on his thinking. But it is only in Lionel Gossman’s thorough and knowledgeable study that the character of Basel (Part I) and the untimely ideas of Burckhardt (Part III) and another native Baseler, Johann Jacob Bachofen (Part II), are truly related to each other. Thus, one of the most intriguing problems of intellectual history, to grasp the influence factors outside an individual thinker have on the genesis and evolution of a concept, is conscientiously dealt with. A look at Friedrich Nietzsche and Franz Overbeck in the Swiss city and the comparison between Burckhardt and Leopold von Ranke, Basel and Berlin, in the short Part IV help to classify the ideas presented in the previous chapters.

Gossman turns first to Basel, devoting nearly a fourth of the book’s pages to an exposition of the city-state’s traditions and culture. He knows his subject well and skillfully brings together the individual pieces of economic, demographic, social and cultural history to form a picture of life in Basel at that time. Well into the nineteenth century the city on the periphery of Switzerland was still very much what it had been for centuries. In the 1840s the polity was still ruled by (since 1529 Protestant) merchants and artisans, just as it had been since the Middle Ages. Its economy was still dominated by merchants that operated across territorial boundaries, and manufactur-

ers such as the ribbon manufactures who had accumulated considerable wealth in the 18th century. With the expansion of industry in the second half of the nineteenth century, Basel—its patriciate—felt the winds of change more strongly. More and more people flocked into the city, continually increasing the number of non-citizens (73% of the population in 1870), and quickly transformed economic, social and living conditions. A younger generation of businessmen and industrialists advocated the adoption of modern techniques of management such as rationalization and maximization of profits. Still, the traditional elites managed to retain much of the patrician structures and thus to hold on to power and influence even well into the age of warring nation-states—longer than anywhere else in Switzerland. As Gossman convincingly argues, it is this peculiarity which made Basel a home for unseasonable ideas and “a sanctuary for intellectual practices that ran counter to the reigning orthodoxies of German scholarship” (p. 8). It coincided with the antimodern stance of contemporaries such as Bachofen and Burckhardt and suggested Basel as the suitable place for them to live and work (cf. p. 102).

The second part deals with Johann Jacob Bachofen who was, like Burckhardt, born into a rich Basel family. In 1844 all of his hopes of a career in public service were smashed, so that he settled down as a private scholar, living withdrawn from public life. The nature and proper method of the study of history was one of the central questions to occupy him throughout his life. To a Bachofen, who despised the materialism, social disorder, and egalitarianism he identified as the effects of industrialism and democracy, the study of history and particularly of antiquity was a way to escape from a depressing reality, some sort of a treasure trove full of arguments against modernity, especially against the regimentation, uniformity, and tyranny he attributed to modernism. The study of antiquity offered a means to overcome the ephemeral character of present-day life, to enrich one’s inner being and thus to counteract the shallowness he detected in his contemporaries, Swiss businessmen and German philologists in particular. Bachofen considered the work of these philologists with contempt, their work of discovering, describing, classifying. Only a few historians, a chosen few, he argued, were really capable of fathoming the depths of antiquity. In this assessment as in many others the background of Basel and of his career shines through. It is fascinating to follow Gossman unravelling the effects of Bachofen’s early disappointment in his criticism of modern historiography and modern life.

There are many parallels between the more conserva-

tive Bachofen and Jacob Burckhardt, whose conceptions of history, religion, and art are presented and analyzed in the most extensive part of the monograph. Both came from the same social background, they were educated by the same teachers and attended nearly the same courses at the University of Berlin. As historians, both chose as their field of work not political history, but “the ways in which human beings have understood themselves, the universe, their own history” (p. 189), as reflected in literature and art. Steeped in neo-humanist thought, both understood history foremost as a means of the education and formation of a fully human person. In reviewing Burckhardt’s ideas, Gossman achieves much more than putting them into the context of nineteenth-century Basel or hinting at the similarities to ideas of Bachofen. One of the great assets of this study is its broad perspective, which is extended to include not only Basel and two prominent Basel historians, but contemporary historians and historiography in Germany and France too. Consequently, the effect of Ranke’s view of history or Michelet’s attempt to go beyond a chronicle of a nation’s wars and revolutions, to name only two examples, can be detected in the evolution of Burckhardt’s thinking, most prominently in his famous concept of cultural history. It is his view of history, of culture and the study of cultural history as essential—but not a-political—history, his appreciation of the history of art within this context, which mark the line of argument in these chapters. Taking in the whole picture, Basel proves to be not a breeding ground of, but a refuge for anti-modern thinkers and their ideas.

#### Notes

[1]. Jacob Burckhardt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, Bd. 6: *Das Altarbild—Das Portraet in der Malerei—Die Sammler. Beitrage zur Kunstgeschichte von Italien*, ed. by Stella von Boch, Johannes Hartau, Kerstin Henggevoß-Duerkop, Martin Wanke (Munich: C.H. Beck and Basel: Schwabe & Co., 2000); Jacob Burckhardt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, Bd. 10: *Aesthetik der bildenden Kunst—Ueber das Studium der Geschichte*, ed. by Peter Ganz (Munich: C.H. Beck and Basel: Schwabe & Co., 2000).

[2]. John R. Hinde, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000).

[3]. Thomas A. Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism. W.M.L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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