



Black Death, COVID, and Why We Keep Telling the Myth of a Renaissance Golden Age and Bad Middle Ages

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“If the Black Death caused the Renaissance, will COVID also create a golden age?”

Versions of this question have been going around as people, trying to understand the present crisis, reach for history’s most famous pandemic. Using history to understand our present is a great impulse, but it means some of the false myths we tell about the Black Death and Renaissance are doing new damage, one of the most problematic in my view being the idea that sitting back and letting COVID kill will somehow by itself naturally make the economy turn around and enter a period of growth and rising wages.

Brilliant Medievalists have been posting Black Death pieces (<https://going-medieval.com/2020/04/02/not-every-pandemic-is-the-black-death/>) correcting misconceptions and flailing (<https://twitter.com/GoingMedieval/status/1246486473668517889>) as one does when an error refuted 50 times returns the 51st (*The Middle Ages weren’t dark and bad compared to the Renaissance!!!*). As a Renaissance historian, I feel it’s my job to shoulder the other half of the load by talking about what the Renaissance *was* like, confirming that our Medievalists are right, it wasn’t a better time to live than the Middle Ages, and to talk about where the error comes from, why we think of the Renaissance as a golden age, and where we got the myth of the bad Middle Ages.

Only half of this is a story about the Renaissance. The other half is later: Victorian Britain, Italy’s unification, World Wars I and II, the Cold War, ages in which the myth of the golden Renaissance was appropriated and retold. And yes, looking at the Black Death and Renaissance is helpful for understanding COVID-19’s likely impact, but in addition to looking at 1348 we need to look at its long aftermath, at the impact *Yersinia Pestis* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yersinia_pestis) had on 1400, and 1500, and 1600, and 1700. So:

- This post is for you if you’ve been wondering whether *Black Death* => *Renaissance* means *COVID* => *Golden Age*, and you want a more robust answer than, “No no no no no!”
- This post is for you if you’re tired of screaming *The Middle Ages weren’t dark and bad!* and want somewhere to link people to, to show them how the myth began.
- This post is for you if you want to understand how an age whose relics make it look golden in retrospect can also be a terrible age to live in.
- And this post is for you if you want to ask what history can tell us about 2020 and come away with hope. Because comparing 2020 to the Renaissance does give me hope, but it’s not the hope of sitting back expecting the gears of history to grind on toward prosperity, and it’s not the hope for something like the Renaissance—it’s hope for something much, much better, but a thing we have to work for, all of us, and hard.

I started writing this post a few weeks ago but rapidly discovered that a thorough answer will be book-length (the book’s now nearly done in fact). What I’m sharing now is just a precis, the parts I think you’ll find most useful now. So sometimes I’ll make a claim without examples, or move quickly over important things, just linking to a book instead of explaining, because my explanation is approaching 100,000 words. That book will come, and soon, but meanwhile please trust me as I give you just urgent parts, and I promise more will follow.





Now, to begin, the phrase “golden age” really invokes two different *unrelated* things:

- (1) an era that achieved great things, art, science, innovation, literature, an era whose wondrous achievements later eras marvel at,
- (2) a good era to live, prosperous, thriving, stable, reasonably safe, with chances for growth, social ascent, days when hard work pays off, in short an era which—if you had to be stranded in some other epoch of history—you’d be likely to choose.

The Renaissance fits the first—we line up to see its wonders in museums—but it absolutely positively no-way-no-how fit the second, and that’s a big part of where our understandings of Renaissance vs. Medieval go wrong. So, our outline for today:

1. Renaissance Life was Worse than the Middle Ages (super-compressed version)
2. Where did the myth come from in the first place? (a Renaissance story)
3. Why is the myth of a golden Renaissance retold so much? (a post-Renaissance story)
4. Conclusion: We Should Aim for Something Better than the Renaissance

It’s also important to begin this knowing that I *love* the Renaissance, I wouldn’t have dedicated my life to studying it if I didn’t, it’s an *amazing* era. I disagree 100% with people who follow “The Middle Ages weren’t really a Dark Age!” with “The Renaissance sucks, no one should care about it!” The Renaissance was amazing, equally amazing as the Middle Ages, or antiquity, or now. I don’t love the Renaissance for being perfect. I love it because it was terrible yet still achieved so much. I love it because, when I read a letter where a woman talks of a nearby city burning, and armies approaching, and a friend who just died of the plague, and letter also talks about ideas for how to remedy these evils, and Xenophon’s advice for times of war, and how Plato and Seneca differ in their advice on patience, and the marvelous new fresco that’s been finished in the city hall. To find these voices of people who faced all that yet still came through it brimming with ideas and making art, that makes me love the human species all the more. And gives me hope.

In Florence, there are little kiosks near the David where you can buy replicas of it, and alongside the plain ones they have copies dipped in glitter paint, so the details of Michelangelo’s design are all obscured with globs of sparkling goo. That’s what the golden age myth does to the Renaissance. So when I say the Renaissance was grim and horrible, I’m not saying we shouldn’t study it, I just want you to scrape off the glitter paint and see the details underneath: damaged, imperfect, a strange mix of ancient and new, doing its best to compensate for flaws in the material and mistakes made early on when teamwork failed, and violent too—David is, after all, about to kill an enemy, a celebration of a conquest, not a peace. Glitter drowns all that out, and this is why, while the myth of the golden Renaissance does terrible damage to how we understand the Middle Ages, it does just as much damage to how we understand the Renaissance. So let’s take a quick peek beneath the glitter, and then, more important, let’s talk about where that suffocating glitter comes from in the first place.



Leading my study abroad Florence students on our THIRD Uffizi visit.

Renaissance Life was Worse than the Middle Ages (super-condensed version)

The Renaissance was like Voldemort, terrible, but great.



On February 25th 1506, Ercole Bentivoglio, commander of Florence's armies, wrote to Machiavelli. He had just read Machiavelli's *Decennale primo*, a history in verse of the events of the last decade. Bentivoglio urged Machiavelli to continue and expand the history, not for them, but for future generations, so that:

"knowing our wretched fortune in these times, they should not blame us for being bad defenders of Italian honor, and so they can weep with us over our and their misfortune, knowing from what a happy state we fell within brief time into such disaster. For if they did not see this history, they would not believe what prosperity Italy had before, since it would seem impossible that in so few days our affairs could fall to such great ruin."

Of these days of precipitous ruin, Burkhardt, founder of modern Renaissance studies, wrote in 1869:

"The first decades of the sixteenth century, the years when the Renaissance attained its fullest bloom, were not favorable to a revival of patriotism; the enjoyment of intellectual and artistic pleasures, the comforts and elegancies of life, and the supreme interests of self-development, destroyed or hampered love of country." (*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, end of Part 1)

Burkhardt seems to be describing a different universe from Bentivoglio, so desperate to prove to posterity that he tried his failing best to defend his homeland's honor. Yet this was the decade that produced Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Michelangelo's *David*, Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*, Bramante's design for the new St. Peter's Basilica, Josquin des Prez's *El grillo* (the Cricket), the first chapters of Ariosto's epic *Orlando Furioso*, and Castiglione's first courtly works at the court of Urbino, soon to be immortalized in *the Courtier* as the supreme portrait of Renaissance culture. These masterworks do indeed seem to project a world of enjoyment and artistic pleasure in utter disconnect with Bentivoglio's despair. Can this be the same Renaissance?



This double vision is authentic to the sources. If we read treatises, orations, dedicatory prefaces, writings on art or courtly conduct, and especially if we read works written about this period a few decades later—like Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* which will be the first to call this age a *rinascita*—we see what Johan Burkhardt described, and what popular understandings of the Renaissance focus on: a self-conscious golden age bursting with culture, art, discovery, and vying with the ancients for the title of Europe's most glorious age. Burkhardt's assessment was correct, if we look only at the sources he was looking at. If instead we read the private letters which flew back and forth between Machiavelli and his correspondents (<https://www.amazon.com/Machiavelli-His-Friends-Personal-Correspondence/dp/087580599X>) we see terror, invasion, plague deaths, a desperate man scrambling to even keep track of the ever-moving threats which hem his fragile homeland in from every side, as friends and family beg for frequent letters, since every patch of silence makes them fear the loved one might be dead.

Machiavelli's correspondent, Ercole Bentivoglio, typifies the tangled political web which shaped these years. His father had been Sante Bentivoglio (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sante_Bentivoglio), who began as a blacksmith's son and common laborer but was identified as an illegitimate member of the Bentivoglio family that dominated Bologna (remember Gendry in *Game of Thrones*?), so Sante was called to rule Bologna for a while when the only other adult Bentivoglio was murdered in an ambush, and young Ercole grew up in a quasi-princely court with all the grandeur we now visit in museums. Ercole's mother was Ginevra Sforza, an illegitimate niece of Francesco Sforza who had recently conquered Milan, replacing the earlier Visconti dukes (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gian_Galeazzo_Visconti) who had in turn seized the throne by treachery fifty-five years before. Renaissance politics isn't turtles all the way down, it's murders and betrayals all the way down.

Why was life in the Renaissance so bad? This is going to be a tiny compressed version of what in the book will be 100 pages, but for now I'll focus on why the Renaissance was not a golden age *to actually live in*, even if it was a golden age in terms of what it left behind.

Let's look at life expectancy: In Italy, average life expectancies in the solidly Medieval 1200s were 35-40, while by the year 1500 (definitely Renaissance) life expectancy in Italian city states had dropped to 18. Why did life expectancy drop? Counter-intuitively the answer is, largely, progress.

War got worse, for one. Over several centuries, innovations in statecraft and policy (which would continue gradually for centuries more) had increased the centralization of power in the hands of kings and governments, especially their ability to gather funds, which meant they could raise larger armies and have larger, bloodier wars. Thus, while both the Middle Ages and Renaissance had lots of wars, Renaissance wars were larger and deadlier, involving more troops and claiming more lives, military and civilian—this wasn't a sudden change, it was a gradual one, but it made a difference.

Economic growth also made the life expectancy go down. Europe was becoming more interconnected, trade increasing. This let merchants grow rich, prosperity for some, but when people move around more, diseases move more too. Cities were also growing denser, more manufacturing jobs and urban employment drawing people to crowd inside tight city walls, and urban spaces always have higher mortality rates than rural. Malaria, typhoid, dysentery, deadly influenza, measles, the classic pox, these old constants of Medieval life grew fiercer in the Renaissance, with more frequent outbreaks claiming more lives.

The Black Death contributed too—in school they talk as if the plague swept through in 1348 then went away, but the bubonic plague did not go away, it remained endemic, like influenza or chickenpox today, a fact of life. I have never read a full set of Renaissance letters which didn't mention plague outbreaks and plague deaths, and Renaissance letters from mothers to their traveling sons regularly include, along with advice on etiquette and eating enough fennel, a list of which towns to avoid this season because there's plague there.



Some more quick un-fun facets of Renaissance life: while the Medieval Inquisition started in 1184, it didn't ramp up its book burnings, censorship, and executions to a massive scale until the Spanish Inquisition in the 1470s and then the printing press and Martin Luther in the 1500s (Renaissance); similarly witchcraft persecution surges to scales unseen in the Middle Ages after the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1486 (Renaissance); and the variety of ingenious tortures being used in prisons increased, rather than decreasing, over time. Rule of thumb: most of the scary practices we think of as "Medieval" were either equally true of the Renaissance, *worse* in the Renaissance, or only started in the Renaissance. If you want corrupt popes, they too can be more terrible as they get richer. And pre-sanitation, the more luxury goods traveled, the more people grew wealthy, the wider the variety of food people ate, and with more kinds of foods came more different kinds of parasites living in your intestines eating your from the inside out, hooray! Even in the Middle Ages we can tell your social class from the variety of parasite eggs in your preserved feces (the more you know!), but in the Renaissance the total could go up, and the frequency and intensity of chronic pain with it (not to mention a wider variety of horrible toxic things doctors would try to feed you as a cure; before sanitation more doctors = *bad*, not good).

In sum, if you're a time traveler and you're being banished, don't pick the Renaissance.

As for how an age so terrible to live through produced the masterpieces and innovations we still hold in awe, my ultrashort answer is that Renaissance art and culture was also a gradual ramp-up from ever-changing Medieval art and culture, and that the leaps we seem to see in the later period are the desperate measures of a desperate time. Thus the radical oversimplification is that, when times get desperate, those in power pour money into art, architecture, grandeur, even science, because such things can provide legitimacy and thus aid stability.

In an era when a book cost as much as a house (it really did!), and Florence's Laurenziana library cost more per GDP than the Moon Landing, you don't get that level of investment unless elites think they're going to get something out of it. Just as today giant corporations fund charities or space tech because they get something out of it, publicity raising their stock prices, so a mighty merchant family might repair a church or build a grand public square and put their coat of arms on it, drawing investment and intimidating rivals.

Culture is a form of political competition—if war is politics by other means, culture is too, but lower risk. This too happened throughout the Middle Ages, but the Renaissance was ever-so-much-more-so in comparison, and whenever you get a combination of (A) increasing wealth and (B) increasing instability, that's a recipe for (C) increasing art and innovation, not because people are at peace and have the leisure to do art, but because they're desperate after three consecutive civil wars and hope they can avoid a fourth one if they can shore up the regime with a display of cultural grandeur. The fruits fill our museums and libraries, but they aren't relics of an age of prosperous peace, they're relics of a lived experience which was, as I said, terrible but great.

Why is the Myth of a Renaissance Golden Age Retold so Much? (a post-Renaissance story)

The thing about golden ages is that they're incredibly useful to *later* regimes and peoples who want to make glorifying claims about themselves. If you present yourself, your movement, your epoch, as similar to a golden age, as the return of a golden age, as the successor to a golden age, those claims are immensely effective in making you seem important, powerful, trustworthy. *Legitimate*.

In sum, one of the most powerful tools for legitimacy is invoking a past golden age. *Under my rule we will be great like X was great!* Whether it's a giant golden age (Roooooome!) or a tiny golden age (the US 1950s!), if you can claim to be bringing it back, you can make a very clear, appealing case for why you should have power. This claim can be made by a king, a duke, a ruling council, a political party, an individual, or a whole movement. It can be made explicitly in rhetoric (*I am the new Napoleon!*) or implicitly by borrowing the decorative motifs, vocabulary, and trappings of an era. An investment banking service that uses a Roman coin profile as its logo, names its different mutual funds after Roman legions, and has a pediment and columns on its corporate headquarters is trying to project legitimacy from the idea of antiquity as a golden age of power and stability.



The newborn United States of America when it decided to make the Washington Monument be a giant obelisk, that was another bid at legitimacy and projecting power by invoking the golden ages of ancient Egypt and conquering Rome, combined in the Washington Monument's case with other things like, instead of the traditional gold tip on top, using high-tech more-expensive-than-gold aluminum (<https://www.tms.org/pubs/journals/jom/9511/binczewski-9511.html>), mixing golden age with power claims about wealth and science.

So...



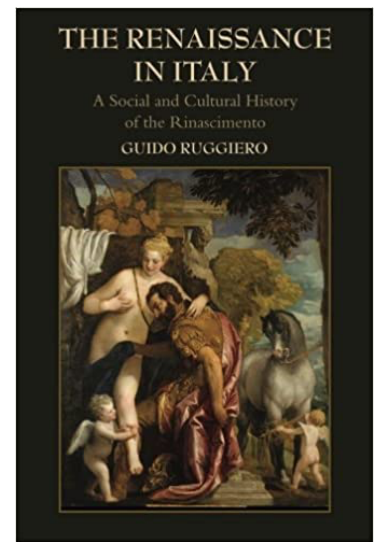
Painting of the Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest, by Willem van Haecht, 1628

...because the Renaissance had called itself a golden age, by the 17th century it had joined the list of epochs that you can invoke to gain legitimacy, and has been invoked thatway many times. This is why 18th and especially 19th and earlier 20th century governments and elites raced to buy up Italian Renaissance art treasures and display them in their homes and museums. And this is why the US Library of Congress building (<http://www.loc.gov/loc/walls/>) is painted all over inside with imitations of Renaissance classicizing frescos and allegorical figures in Renaissance style even though the quotations they include and values they celebrate are largely not Renaissance.

Scraping the glitter off to reveal the imperfect and violent David underneath is an assault on our understandings of our past and present, on what it means to be ourselves, even on our sense of where the future is heading. People find that unsettling. And people who look to Renaissance celebrities as role models and intellectual ancestors don't like to hear about their rough un-modern sides. So people get hostile, or unsettled, they keep telling the myths, and use cherry picked sources to glob the glitter-paint back on. It's not always done in bad faith—if from early childhood you've always learned the Renaissance was sparkling and golden, and you see a bare patch where the glitter has come off, of course you'll think that bare patch is the error, that the still-sparkly parts are the real thing. You treat the oddball patch as damage, and keep believing what that documentary or museum label told you years ago when you saw your first Renaissance masterpiece and fell in love. So the myth persists, and for every attempt to correct it we're up against a dozen tour guide scripts, and TV specials, and corporate statements, and outdated textbooks, and new books (fiction and nonfiction alike) that glob the glitter on. So you can understand why, from time to time, Renaissance and Medieval specialists alike just have to stop and scream like Sisyphus.



David gets his regular scrub. He needs it.



(<https://www.amazon.com/Renaissance-Italy-Cultural-History-Rinascimento/dp/0521719380>)

Recommended reading for more, or see my page of History book recommendations (<https://www.exurbe.com/history-book-recommendations/>)

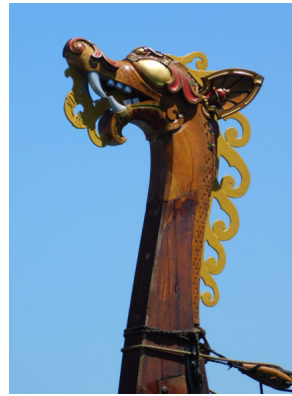
Conclusion: We Should Aim for Something Better than the Renaissance

This, in not-very-brief, is why we keep telling the myth of the golden Renaissance, and bad Middle Ages.

Now, let's look again at our other starting question: "*If the Black Death caused the Renaissance will the COVID pandemic cause a golden age?*" You see the problems with the question now: the Black Death didn't cause the Renaissance, not by itself, and the Renaissance was not a golden age, at least not the kind that you would want to live in, or to see your children live in. But I do think that both Black Death and Renaissance are useful for us to look at now, not as a window on what will happen if we sit back and let the gears of history grind, but as a window on how vital action is.

The Black Death first: it didn't cause the Renaissance, no one thing caused the Renaissance, it was a conjunction of many gradual and complicated changes accumulating over centuries (banking, legal reform, centralization of power, urbanization, technology, trade) which came together to make an age like the Medieval but ever-so-much-more-so. The idea that the Black Death caused a prosperity boom comes from old studies which showed that wages went way up after the Black Death, creating new possibilities for laborers to gain in wealth and rise in status (like the golden 1950s). But those were small studies from a few places (mainly bits of England), and we have newer studies now that show that wages only rose in a few places, that in other places wages didn't rise, or actually went down, or that they started to rise but elites cracked down with new laws to control labor, creating (among other things) the first workhouses, laws limiting freedom of movement, and other new forms of unfreedom and control. What the Black Death really caused was *change*. It caused regime changes, instability letting some monarchies or oligarchies rise, or fall. It caused policy and legal changes, some oppressive, some liberating. And it caused economic changes, some regions or markets collapsing, and others growing.

If you really want to know what COVID will do, I think the place to look is not Renaissance Italy, but the Viking settlements in Greenland, which vanished around 1410. *Did they all die of the plague?* No. We're pretty sure they never got the plague, they were too isolated. But the Greenland settlements' economy had long depended on the walrus trade: they hunted walruses and sold the ivory and skins, and ships would come from Norway or Iceland to trade for walrus, bringing goods one couldn't make in Greenland, like iron, or fine fabric, or wheat. But after 1348 the bottom dropped out of the walrus market, and the trading ships stopped coming. By 1400 no ships had visited Greenland for years except the few that were blown off-course by storm. And meanwhile there were labor shortages and vacant farms on the once-crowded mainland. So we think the Greenland Vikings emigrated, asked those stray ships to take them with them back to Europe, as many as could fit, abandoning one life to start another. That's what we'll see with COVID: collapse and growth, busts for one industry, booms for another, sudden wealth collecting in some hands, while elsewhere whole communities collapse, like Flint Michigan, and Viking Greenland, and the many disasters in human history which made survivors abandon homes and villages, and move elsewhere. A lot of families and communities will lose their livelihoods, their homes, their everythings, and face the devastating need to start again. And as that happens, we'll see different places enact different laws and policies to deal with it, just like after the Black Death. Some places/regimes/policies will increase wealth and freedom, while others will reduce it, and the complicated world will go on being complicated.



It's Viking time!



The Wheel of Fortuna, which turns, elevating men from beggar, to townsman, to king, then falling again in a chaotic cycle representing life. Notice the ABSENCE of an idea of the world getting better OVERALL.

That's why I say we should aim to do better than the Renaissance.

Because we can. We have so much they didn't. We know so much.

For one thing, we know how pandemics work. We know about germs, viruses, contagion, hand-washing, sanitation, lowering the curve. We can make plans, take action that does something. Forget 1348, even in 1918 we didn't understand how to treat influenza, how it moved, and hand washing was still controversial. 1918 was a US election year but we didn't discuss delaying or changing the election, there was nothing we could do to make it safer, we didn't know about six-feet-apart, or sanitizing voting booths, or have the infrastructure to consider vote-by-mail, all we could do was let men (women still had two more years to wait) vote and die. We've come a long way.



Suffragettes at the 1918 election.

This year, 2020, this is the first time in the history of this planet that any species has faced a pandemic knowing what it is, and how to take effective action. We aren't taking perfect action, and we absolutely should be criticizing and condemning the many flaws—some small, some huge—in how it's being dealt with, but *there is real, efficacious action we can take*. As an historian, not just of the plague of 1348, but of the plagues of 1435, and 1485, and 1494, and 1503, and 1596, and 1630, and 1656, what I see is those many generations who not only had to live through this over and over, but who had no hope that their children would ever be free of it. We know about vaccines, and that we'll make one—it'll take a while, and we'll mess up various ways along the way, but none of us is afraid our grandchildren will grow up spending one year in ten locked up in their homes like this as COVID-19 spreads; we will solve it. We know we'll solve it, and any other age in history would treasure that confidence like miracle. Because all Petrarch could say after losing his world in 1348 was that, the next time plague comes back, we should console ourselves by thinking of it as dying with much good company.

We know about mental health now too. We're talking about the mental health crisis of COVID, the mental health costs of fear, poverty, racial injustice—in 1918 we were still excited by electroshock, and debating the radical new idea that outpatient psych treatment might be a thing, instead of doing only institutionalization. We have the language to talk about the mental cost of crisis, and that language alone opens so many possibilities for helping, acting, aiding that previous eras never had. Without the concept, we couldn't start to try to treat it—now we can.

And we have more language: social safety net, social welfare, social services, concepts for thinking how state and society can put structures in place to relieve human suffering. We have economics now, not the kind of economics that's trying to prognosticate the stock market, the basic kind with terms like GDP, and unemployment rate, and wealth gap, and retirement age, and inflation. There were economies in 1348, and even social services, hospitals, orphanages, city grain supplies, but we didn't have a science for discussing it, vast banks of data comparing how different systems work, or help, or harm. After the Black Death when different places tried different policies for their recovery, they didn't have comparisons, examples—we do. We won't be guessing in the dark when each nation decides its recovery plan for this pandemic—we won't be omniscient, but even partial knowledge makes us powerful. That raises the stakes.

ENSURING MENTAL HEALTH OF ELDERLY DURING COVID-19

- 1. Spend quality time with family & get involved in family discussions
- 2. Involve in daily activities like gardening, cleaning & cooking to help reduce anxiety
- 3. Spend time on recreational activities such as board games, music, reading etc
- 4. Connect to loved ones through phone calls/video calls to keep the stress at bay
- 5. Make sometime for exercise, yoga to boost physical & mental health
- 6. Cut down on listening to News; seek information from credible sources like the Health Ministry website



(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/enriquedans/2019/03/16/climate-change-is-now-on-the-political-agenda-thanks-to-people-still-too-young-to-vote/#1bf73b88552e>)

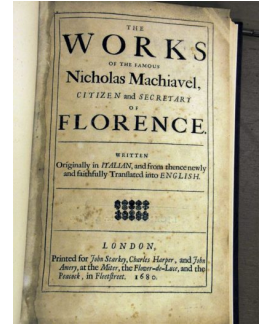
Youth climate strikers in New York City, featured in an article in Forbes (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/enriquedans/2019/03/16/climate-change-is-now-on-the-political-agenda-thanks-to-people-still-too-young-to-vote/#1bf73b88552e>)

Because, like after 1348, there is about to be big change. There are many options before us, different things that states can do post-COVID, some of which will help with poverty, empower labor, lend a helping hand to those exhausted Greenland Vikings as they start again, and there are other things states can do that will instead widen the gaps, entrench elites, help the rich get richer and see the disempowered locked more inescapably into modern versions of workhouses. Different places will make different choices. Some places will see regime changes, others just policy shifts, but there aren't vast wheels of history that lock a pandemic into automatically yielding a boom or bust. There is no automatic outcome. Rather, all nations in the world are about to make a set of choices which will have a far larger, deeper impact on the next decades, on lives, rights, options, everything, than the normal choices states make in a normal year. The stakes are higher. Unlike in 1348 we have a lot of knowledge, answers, options, concepts we could try like safety nets, or UBI, or radical free markets, many very different things. Which means that acting now, demanding now, voting, pushing, proposing change, we're shaping policies that will affect our big historical trajectory more than normal—a great chance to address and finally change systemic inequalities, or to let them entrench. There is no predetermined outcome of pandemic; pandemic is a hallway leading to a room where something big is going to be decided—human beings decide.

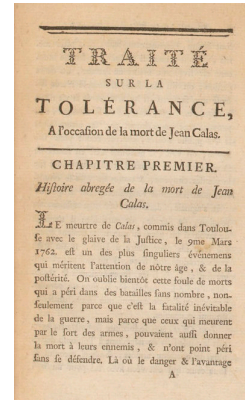
I love space exploration. I've written novels about it, and a song that makes everyone cry (<https://sassafress.bandcamp.com/track/somebody-will-duet-with-guitar>), I make myself tear up thinking about it all the time, especially civilian spaceflight and the hope that this chapter of history might be advanced by curiosity, teamwork, and human hope, not war or competition. But after looking forward to it for so long, the recent SpaceX launch (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crew_Dragon_Demo-2) was the first I've watched in a long time without tearing up. Because watching a space ship launch while looters are smashing shops outside my window (and cops ignoring them in favor of harassing peaceful protestors (https://www.hpherald.com/news/how-a-peaceful-protest-march-evolved-into-violence/article_0e4e483c-a411-11ea-97a8-03e86f583977.html) & giving carte blanche to the gunwielding vigilante (https://www.hpherald.com/news/akira-removes-security-guard-armed-with-assault-rifle-after-community-outcry/article_39c9d84c-a519-11ea-9125-4760036ebceb.html) on the corner) feels a lot like Leonardo painting the Mona Lisa while cities around were literally burning (and rich merchants' private goons guarding their wealth & allies as faction dictated). This year, this *specific* year, 2020, with the world shut down by plague, and civil strife, and fire in the streets, and teetering distrust in governments, this is the first time our present has reminded me of the Renaissance. But we aren't the Renaissance—we have social science, and efficacious medicine, and the Enlightenment under our belts, when we learned we can analyze our laws and institutions, and step by step replace them with better ones. We aim for better.



At the Renaissance Society of America Conference some years ago, two scholar friends got into a debate about whether Machiavelli's world was fundamentally pre-modern, different from our own, or whether fundamentally it faced the same problems we do. Responding to the claim that the Renaissance was far more violent than our present, the advocate of Renaissance-as-modern quoted the statistic that modern Chicago had as many murders every year as Renaissance Florence. The rebuttal that surged in *my* mind was that the population of Florence was less than 100K, so Chicago's millions have far fewer murders *per capita*, but the other speaker had a far better answer. We're working to change that murder rate. We study it, understand it, plan interventions, act. We believe it's a problem we can solve, *should* solve, that citizen and state should act, and if the state will not the state should change. We have policy studies, plans, alternatives.



Petrarch wanted to end the cruel wars for light causes that were wounding Italy, but had no plan beyond sending his poem out into the world, and urging elites to have their kids read Cicero. Machiavelli also wanted to end the cruel wars for light causes, and seeing that reading Cicero had failed he proposed a new way of evaluating history (<https://www.exurbe.com/machiavelli-s-p-q-f/>), collecting examples of what worked and didn't in the past, basing our statecraft and actions on them so the next time we try things we'll choose more wisely. It was the birth of social science. It took us a long time for us to get good at it, to turn the observations in *The Prince* into big databases and systematic studies, just as it took a long time for medicine to get from the four humors to our confidence that we can make a vaccine, but we *can* make one. We *can* make good social policy. Will we do it perfectly? No. Many bad policies will be advanced, just as vaccines and treatments will be distributed unfairly and slowed down by bigotry and selfishness. But we *can* do it, we have tools, as real in our hands and libraries as the knowledge of vaccines is real—tools Machiavelli and Petrarch would have given *anything* to have. We can aim for better than another Renaissance.



Let's try.

Voltaire, 1763 "Treatise on Tolerance," written in his outrage over the judicial murder of Jean Calas.