

# Florentine Civic Humanism: A Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought:-

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## Introduction:-

**Florentine Civic Humanism** emerged in the first decades of the fifteenth century was a compilation of an **intellectual** and **cultural revolution**.

The civic humanists rejected **medieval perceptions of individual and society**.

## Changed view about family life and economic activity:-

While medieval culture always gave importance to the **renunciation of sexual activity , private property** to carry on its self-assumed highness , **the civic humanists acknowledged family life as natural and as essential platform to fulfill our purpose as social animals.**

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In the same way, **civic humanists of fifteenth century regarded economic activity and material wealth in a positive light**, natural for the individual and necessary for the community.

Instead of *Vita*

***Contemplativa***(contemplation, internal meditation and prayer), prescribed by Christian and Classical philosophy, they stressed on ***Vita Activa*** (activity in familial and public sphere).

## Civic Humanists and their relation with Modern Historical Consciousness:-

Hans Baron, eminent Renaissance Historian states that civic humanists created the modern discipline of history as well as a kind of modern Historical Consciousness. ***Historiae Florentini Populi*** , written by Leonardo Bruni, depicts a noteworthy sensibility as it turned down all kinds of medieval historical tales . It, however started the journey of rationally analyzed historical events.

## Civic Humanism and a new understanding of the Classical World:-

Widened acceptance of *Viva Activa* and gradually increasing historical consciousness created a new perception of the Classical World. Petrarchean Humanism of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was regarded as a nostalgic literary movement by the civic humanists but at the same time they criticized Petrarch's works as a slavish imitation of the Classical Heritage.

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On the other hand, the assimilation of Civic Values and Classicism in the minds of the civic humanists gave birth to a new approach towards antiquity. **The civic humanists frequently referred classical notions, texts and genres as instruments for combating with issues and problems endemic to their own society. Their imitation of classical literature was critical and creative.**

## Civic Humanism and Liberty :-

There remain two opposing views about the relation of the concept of liberty with that of civic humanism.

According to Hans Baron, *Oration for the Funeral of Nanni Strozzi* written in 1428 by **Leonardo Bruni** created the base of liberalism , which had no previous intellectual tradition.

**Connecting citizen's liberty in his private sphere with his political activity , according to Baron was completely a brand new ideal of Civic Humanism.**



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In Contrast, Historian like, **Quentin Skinner** opines that, concept of liberty was conceptualized and highlighted in all **three late medieval political languages** in Italy: the language of Roman Law, the language of Scholastic Philosophy and the Pre- Humanist Language.

**James Blyth** adds that, one of the important medieval political discourse, i.e. **Scholastic Philosophy** contemplated the celebrated attributes of Civic Humanism much earlier.

## Polemy of Lucca, Marsilius of Padua and their legacy of Scholastic Philosophy:-

keeping aside the debate between Baron and Skinner, one must acknowledge the philosophy of **Polemy** and **Marsilius** (manifested in their works like *De Regimine Principum* and *Defensor Pacis*) as a pre cursor of **Civic Humanism**.

**Although Polemy failed to produce a coherent political theory as he continuously being tainted between Augustinian and Aristotelian ideas and also there was a wide disparity between his specific republican notion and sympathies one may admit that**

**the insights of Polemy created a base where spawning and expansion of the Civic Humanism became easy.**

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In contrast to **Polemy** , **Marsilius** was a systematic thinker. His ***Defensor pacis*** is revered as the most coherent and original political work throughout the Middle Ages. **Though there was an anachronism between his pro egalitarian imagery and his personal inclining towards aristocracy and monarchy, his vivid work to substantiate republican insight within the contemporary world of politics, one may consider his philosophy as a fertile land, where later republican ideal, i.e. Civic Humanism could be born.**

## Birth of the Humanist Political Language:-

Humanist political language which was designed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century northern Italy along with the popularization of Civic Humanism, was not necessarily populist or egalitarian. It perceived power relations, hierarchies and inequality as arbitrary and unjustified. **Liberty and equality became the important ideals to be nurtured within the sphere modern political functioning.**

## Portrayal of Florence as an embodiment of Republican Thoughts:-

Hans Baron highlights the writings of Leonardo Bruni and his pals where they shown their belief that the republican ideal was not only restricted within the ambit of contemporary politics but it influenced the social life of 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence immensely.

Baron, describes this very trend of Bruni and his friends as one of the salient factors of Civic Humanism .

## Question self: further progress of the Civic Humanism:-

As research went on, **Bruni** himself acknowledged that his earlier interpretation of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence was inadequate. In his ***On the Florentine Constitution***, **Bruni** admits that, **the constitution of Florence was not fully democratic, but rather a mixed version of democracy and aristocracy.**

From this realization of **Bruni** we can assume that, just like stressing on **familial- social activity, new understanding of Classical Heritage**, continuously **opining for liberal (republican) political thought**, this **self questioning** had also become an integral factor of the **Civic Humanism**.

## Civic Humanism and Modernity:-

As Civic Humanism undermined the fundamental premises of pre-modern worldview generally (Physical, supernatural, social facets of reality are intertwined to one another), and rejected the theological base of the mainstream tradition of Western Philosophy (Postulation of phenomenal reality), historians like, Pocock (*Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought*) opine that, the inherent ideal of this very humanism can be regarded as a modern one.

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**From this dual rejection of the pre- modern world view and theological base of the Western Philosophy , one may assume Civic Humanism as a symptom of modernity , not as its source.**

**It should be noted that, as the Civic Humanism , unlike the Nominalists before them and the Protestant Reformers after them were mainly interested in ‘political thought’ , it can be asserted that their republicanism was the first distinct symptom/expression of modern political thought.**



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The Civic Humanist's notions of liberty and equality were quite limited and also it has been traced in several times that, they often tended to be torn apart by oppositional relation between their personal notion and their external proclamation. **Later political languages , i.e. Enlightenment and Romanticism gave birth to a much more cohesive definition of Liberty and Equality, but Civic Humanists were the first batch of thinkers who designed the basic structure of liberty and egalitarianism ( as a characteristic of modernity), though a tainted one.**

## **Public administration and Civic Humanism:-**

The founding values of **Public administration system of 18<sup>h</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries** were more or less **based on the ideal of Civic Humanism**. The moral and political philosophy of **Civic Humanism** influenced the founders of **later day's Public administration system**. The importance of **universal moral validity** was felt by the eminent architects of **18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century's Public administration**.

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If one highlight the foundation of **public administration system in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century America** , he or she can notice that, **the intellectuals** who designed the new administrative system for their country, **were very much inclined to reflect the idea of ‘civic good’ in every corner of the said system.**

**Yes, they failed to abolish the tradition of slavery and could not establish the political rights of contemporary women but one aspect was common in the minds of them, i.e. validating the notion of morality and liberty.**

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basically, there was a chain system, where the inherent value of **'civic good'** at first influenced the **process of constitution writing** of 19<sup>th</sup> century United states of America.

Then, the newly scribed constitution , based on the idea of **'civic good'** or **'universal moral validity'** became an instrument to erect the public administrative system according to its own.

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“All human Constitutions are subject to corruption, and must perish, unless they are ‘timely renewed ‘ by reducing them to their first principles .....Some men... have proposed a necessity of reducing every state once in an age or two, to the integrity of its first principle: but they ought to have examined, whether that principle be good or evil.”.. ( **Algernon Sidney ,England, 1622-1683**)

“Can one generation bind another, and all others, in succession forever? I think not.... Nothing then is unchangeable but the inherent and unalienable rights of man ( **Thomas Jefferson, America, 1743-1826**)

These above mentioned statements of the two eminent intellectuals clearly assert that the binding notion of Civic Humanism, i.e. **universal moral validity was able to influence men of thoughts beyond centuries as well as countries.**

## Conclusion:-

In short, acknowledging all the inherent disparities entangled with it, we cannot deny the fact that this **Civic Humanism eased the entire transition from medieval to that of modern thought.**

Right after the completion of Florentine war held against the Visconti and Milan, it has been widely agreed that, **Civic Humanism redefined present notions of citizenship and liberty and created a new expectations about the role of intellectuals and education in society.**

# Leonardo Bruni: Personification of Civic Humanism

