

‘BIG STATES’ OR ‘SMALL STATES’? JACOB BURCKHARDT AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

This contribution aims at investigating if, among the points to ponder identified by an author like Jacob Burckhardt, there are some ideas that might suggest a predilection for an ideal political model that includes and promotes, somehow, *political participation*. A dilemma that has two possible solutions: *big states* or *small states*.

Keywords: State, political participation, public life, private life.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of *political participation* clearly has three main orientations: a state that restricts participation or even discourages it; a public institution that, through popular assemblies or actions, deceives citizens into believing that they are involved in its decisions; and a State that is the perfect ‘training ground’ for participation, as citizens are involved in public decisions in proportion to their individual position and social function. In other words, a context in which citizens can participate in *public affairs* based on their abilities and interests¹.

¹ Inspired by some observations made by Alessandro Passarin D’Entrèves (ID., *Obbedienza e resistenza in una società democratica*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milan 1970, then in ID., *Potere e libertà in una società aperta*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2005), Giuseppe Sorigi argues: «Now, it is predictable that [...] the State, as we know it today, is about to ‘disappear’. Being a ‘historical product’, it can be overcome by historical progress. We are probably about to witness ‘the emergence of a new and different type of civil society’ which will generate new types of obligations, and therefore of a new state».

2. An apparent contradiction?

It seems obvious that these three orientations are associated with as many options for dealing with the problem of the State², and, in particular, for addressing the issue of *political participation*³.

And, previously⁴, Jacob Burckhardt's mention of this phenomenon⁵ had represented an opportunity to point out – focusing on citizens who *could* and *should* participate – that *knowledge* and *learning* are not ends in themselves, or even self-referential actions. These actions might be, on the other hand,

Then, he clarifies: «‘We will see new and great political endeavours’, even if we don't know what they will be. What is certain is that we must ask ourselves whether it will be a state that is structured in a way ‘such as to make us refuse to participate in it’; a state that deceives citizens with ‘participatory’ actions or assemblies; or – we should add – a state that, on the other hand, is the perfect training ground for a participation that is neither mythicized nor mystified, but effective, efficient, well structured, proportionally accessible to every citizen based on their different positions and social functions» (G. SORGI, *Per uno studio della partecipazione politica. Hobbes, Locke, Tocqueville*, Milella, Lecce 1981, pp. 13-14).

² Let us not forget, as Sorgi points out, that the phenomenon of political participation began to be a problem «in a specific historical era: when a new type of social structure began to emerge, and legal-political action began to provide new responses in step with the times, and a new type of state developed. It was the era that marked the transition from absolute sovereignty to rule of law». When « subjective public rights emerge, claimed by individuals and social groups finally participating in the concrete exercise of sovereignty and obtaining protective juridical-political institutions which have ‘regulated’ the power of the state-government with the aim of limiting and controlling it» (*ibid.*, p. 169).

³ See Sorgi, according to whom participation can't be considered as «a simple and abstract phenomenon». It is, on the other hand, a «contextualized» phenomenon. Participation «materialises – and therefore should be studied – under specific historical-social conditions. These conditions include both the variety and discontinuity of a single society, with its differences and its subsystems, and the evolution and succession of different types of social organisation». Ultimately, according to Sorgi, what Alessandro Passarin D'Entrèves says about political obligation (*Obbedienza e resistenza in una società democratica*, cit., p. 84), also «applies, with the necessary adjustments, to participation. It can take different shapes and have different meanings according to the concept that a national political culture has of the State and according to the juridical-political structures implemented by a State» (G. Sorgi, *Per uno studio della partecipazione politica. Hobbes, Locke, Tocqueville*, cit., pp. 14-15).

⁴ We took part in the University of Teramo research project *Iconologia e simbolica nell'ordine politico tra modernità e post-modernità* (Political iconology and symbolism between modernity and post-modernity) of which Fiammetta Ricci was the scientific director, as part of the National Project PRIN 2008 – *Identità, rituali e memoria nell'epoca moderna e post-moderna* (Identity, rituals and memory in the modern and post-modern era) whose coordinator was Claudio Bonvecchio. My study, *Demitizzare lo Stato. Considerazioni a partire da Jacob Burckhardt*, in F. RICCI – G. SORGI (edited by), *Miti del potere. Potere senza miti*, Mimesis, Milan-Udine 2013, pp. 51-74, was a result of this experience.

⁵ For a detailed reconstruction of Jacob Burckhardt's life, see W. KAEGI, *J. Burckhardt*, 7 vol., Basel-Stuttgart, 1947-1982. See also the volume by Karl Löwith, translated by Laura Bazzicalupo: *Jacob Burckhardt. Der Mensch inmitten der Geschichte*, Italian translation *Jacob Burckhardt: l'uomo nel mezzo della storia*, Editori Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2004.

important cultural preconditions⁶ for active participation in the political life of the community to which a citizen belongs⁷.

However, a closer look at Burckhardt's theoretical path can offer even more food for thought. In fact, what is written in some paragraphs from two letters written by the Swiss author, is surprising:

«With me, freedom and the state have not lost much. More importantly, men like me can't build any state; nevertheless, as long as I live, I want to be available to the world around me, and participate, be a good private citizen [...] but I don't want to have anything to do with society on a large scale, I can't; I can't help but be ironic when I think about it. I'm more interested in details, partial views: I have learned enough, I would have enough experience to participate in politics on a large scale, if I was asked to; but I don't want to get involved anymore, especially in our local confusion»⁸.

And, more explicitly: «Politics is dead to me; what I do is just what a man should do»⁹.

This is clearly a contradiction. On the one hand, Burckhardt theorizes a *dutiful, conscious, wise* participation in *public affairs*, while, on the other, the author himself, in his correspondence, says he is disappointed, and refuses any public commitment¹⁰ to devote himself only to his *private life*.

⁶ Shaping, changing, transforming the contents of a community is, according to Burckhardt, the effect of a reciprocal, constant and progressive influence of three main 'forces' of civilization: *state, religion, and culture* which, by confronting and challenging each other continuously, determine the nature and course of historical events, while the structure and meaning of a society are influenced by those events. (J. BURCKHARDT, *Considerazioni sulla storia del mondo*, Italian translation by A. BANFI, Bompiani, Milan, 1945, pp. 62). On the significance of culture for Burckhardt and on the relationship between these three forces, see also pp. 62-72 and pp. 83-146 in *ibid*.

⁷ In this regard, see, as already mentioned, *Demitizzare lo Stato. Considerazioni a partire da Jacob Burckhardt*, cit., pp. 62-63.

⁸ Lett. a Schauenburg, 28-2-1846, *Briefe. Vollständige und kritische Ausgabe in 10 Bänden mit Benutzung des handschriftlichen Nachlasses, bearbeitet von Max Burckhardt*, bisher 9 Bde. Basel/Struttgart, 1849-1860, 2, p. 209. As Laura Bazzicalupo points out (*Opere di Burckhardt e sigle di abbreviazione. Nota dell'autore* in ID., *Il potere e la cultura. Sulle riflessioni storico-politiche di Jakob Burckhardt*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Naples, 1990, pp. 321-322), a separate edition of J. Burckhardt's letters had been published: *J. Burckhardts Briefe an seinem Freund Friedrich von Preen, 1864-1893*, Struttgart/Berlin, 1922 and *Briefe an einem Architekten 1870-1889*, München, 1913.

⁹ Lett. a Kindel, 6-12-1846, *Briefe*, cit., 3, p. 48.

¹⁰ Although, according to Delio Cantimori, this is a minor detail, it should be pointed out that Burckhardt worked as a journalist and political commentator at *Blaser Zeitung*. See D. CANTIMORI, *La biografia di J. Burckhardt*, in ID., *Storici e storia*, Einaudi, Turin, 1971, p. 148.

3. Burckhardt and political participation

To shed light on this apparent contradiction, we should focus on Burckhardt's attempt to participate in *political affairs*. In this regard, Laura Bazzicalupo's intervention could help clarify¹¹ the situation: in fact, she outlines the personal and cultural background of the Swiss historian¹². And, therefore, the foundations on which he built himself as a *citizen* and as a *scholar*¹³.

However, the most important thing, now, is to investigate if, among the points to ponder identified by Jacob Burckhardt, there are some ideas that might suggest a predilection for an ideal political model¹⁴ that includes and promotes, in some way, a form of *political participation* that embodies the ideal of man and citizen with which Burckhardt identifies.

To do this, we should focus on some theoretical assumptions discussed in detail by the author when addressing political issues.

According to Burckhardt, as pointed out by Laura Bazzicalupo, «the ultimate purpose, also of politics, should be the development of human faculties, of ‘individual energy’, which requires the absence of any restrictions and variety, that is, different living conditions and opportunities that stimulate and do not hinder human potential»¹⁵.

When analysing political organisations, in fact, Burckhardt refers to the individualistic need for ‘differentiation’ mentioned by Humboldt, and almost identifies this need for variety with the need to

¹¹ In this regard, see the first section, *Le componenti culturali*, and the fourth section, *La potenza Stato*, of the study by Bazzicalupo mentioned above, *Il potere e la cultura. Sulle riflessioni storico-politiche di Jakob Burckhardt*, cit., pp. 5-40 and pp. 116-148.

¹² «Alongside the undoubted importance of these contacts, more frequent at the end of the nineteenth century, we should mention that tradition to which reference was made with regard to the liberal-aristocratic matrix of humanistic education, which is Burckhardt's original political and spiritual background, the same background from which he is forced, being aware of the times in which he lives, to distance himself» (*ibid.*, p. 35).

¹³ «It is» as Laura Bazzicalupo writes «the cultural and political conscience of an elite for which, according to the classics and the tradition of the moralists, men should reject violence and the utilitarian activism of merchants and industrialists, and wonder about the right lifestyle a man should adopt; a man who, as already pointed out by Montaigne, should be devoted to reason, moderate pleasures, ‘justice’ and ‘peace’. A man who, according to Montaigne, achieves his balance and full self-awareness by distancing himself from the *chaos*, from the disorder, from the discomfort caused by religious wars and civil crises. A ‘liberal’ reason that rejects the principle of authority to promote the autonomy of judgment, but that, having overcome the political defeat of power dissociation, identifies the ethical experience with social action, and enhances individual identities as a result of a balance between public and private» (*ibidem*).

¹⁴ Let's narrow the choice down to the three options mentioned earlier and discussed by Sorgi, G. SORGI, *Per uno studio della partecipazione politica. Hobbes, Locke, Tocqueville*, cit., pp. 13-14.

¹⁵ See L. BAZZICALUPO, *Il potere e la cultura. Sulle riflessioni storico-politiche di Jakob Burckhardt*, cit., p. 39.

protect freedoms. In fact, he shares with Humboldt the same idea of a state whose responsibility should be limited to security¹⁶.

In other words, if the ultimate purpose of politics is «the development of human faculties», this growth should be supported by a context in which the state can demarcate the boundaries of its action and its responsibilities, which should be limited, as already said, to ensuring peace and security, while men should be free to choose whether to develop these abilities or not, and to choose from a ‘variety’ of living conditions.

Of course, if this framework is taken into consideration, we should «better investigate the meaning of two expressions: freedom *from* the state and freedom *in* the state»¹⁷. As it is known, these expressions imply two different concepts, *negative liberty* and *positive liberty*¹⁸, which are still useful theoretical tools for multiple political analyses of the evolving concept of state.

To continue this discussion, however, the second concept should be clarified. And Dino Pasini provides an exhaustive explanation in this regard: «political freedom is the freedom of the state-society, of the people *in* a state, that is, the active, effective, substantial participation of citizens in decision-making, political affairs, the exercise of political power. And, therefore, self-determination, self-control [...] in other words, self-government»¹⁹.

¹⁶ «The anthropological definition of modern state provided by Humboldt – a state that must respect and protect, without interfering with them, active and ethical individualities – is based on the protection of single personalities and on the defence of the individual, whose most authentic nature comes out in social life, without constraints other than those that make social life possible» (*ibid.*, p. 38). According to Burckhardt, one of Humboldt's reference works is *Saggio sui limiti dell'azione dello Stato* (Italian translation by G. PERTICONE, Giuffrè, Milan, 1965).

¹⁷ G. SORGI, *Per uno studio della partecipazione politica. Hobbes, Locke, Tocqueville*, cit., p. 20.

¹⁸ See the essay by I. BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, in Id., *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969 (Italian translation: *Quattro saggi sulla libertà*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1989). On Berlin's political theory, see, among others, C.J. GALIPEAU, *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994 and J. GRAY, *Berlin*, Fontana, London, 1995. See also the essay collection A. PASSARIN D'ENTRÈVES (edited by), *La libertà politica*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milan, 1974, which also includes the first translation of Berlin's essay of 1958. Particularly important for the analysis of this debate, which involved N. Bobbio, U. Scarpelli, A. Passarin D'Entrèves, was also the Italian edition of the volume F.E. OPPENHEIM, *Dimensioni della libertà*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1964, whose preface was written by Giulio Preti. As it is known, a comparison between the *liberty of Ancients* and the *liberty of moderns* had already been made in 1819, at the Athénée Royal, by Benjamin Constant (B. CONSTANT, *La libertà degli antichi paragonata a quella dei moderni*, Einaudi, Turin, 2005).

¹⁹ D. PASINI, *Riflessioni sul problema della libertà negativa e positiva*, in ‘Prassi e teoria’, 10, 1976, poi in *Problemi di filosofia politica*, Jovene, Naples, 1977, p. 103. See also A. PASSERIN D'ENTRÈVES, *La dottrina dello Stato. Elementi di analisi e di interpretazione*, Giappichelli, Turin, 2009³, pp. 307-322. And, among others, Giuseppe Sorgi (G. SORGI, *Per uno studio della partecipazione politica. Hobbes, Locke, Tocqueville*, cit., p. 21).

4. 'Big states' or 'small states'?

So, getting back to Burckhardt, the dilemma has two possible solutions: a *big state* or a *small state*. The first model, which is Burckhardt's model, as he lives in a state with a great power, is beginning to show its structural defects due largely to the growing bureaucratization process of which he now feels himself a victim. A development that involves not only the state as an institution, but also the citizens, now considered as parts of the modern state mechanism. Therefore, *great state power* seems to be an option to be discarded, as it not only deceives citizens into taking part in public affairs, but *depoliticizes* them, as it denies any empathic link with politics²⁰.

So, at least in theory, the preferred option should be a *small state*²¹, as it promotes direct political participation²². As pointed out by Burckhardt, in fact: «small states exist, so that there may be some spot-on earth where the largest possible proportion of the members of the state are citizens in the fullest sense of the word»²³. But what does «citizens in the fullest sense of the word» mean? It seems clear that, according to Burckhardt, the *state-individual* connection can't exist if, at the basis of it, there is an idea of *citizenship* understood as the bureaucratic *status* of a private person who asks of the community only the greatest possible security for «himself and his property, for which he pays his taxes amid sighs»²⁴. However, as pointed out by Kaegi, the *State-citizen* link, according to the Swiss historian, may exist if there is «shared information on developments in public affairs», if

²⁰ See Lett. a von Preen, 1-5-1881, *Briefe*, cit., 7; Lett. a Max Aliot, 21-3-1885, *Briefe*, cit., 8; and also 19-11-1881, *Briefe*, cit., 7; Lett. a F. Preen, 27-4-1870, *Briefe*, cit., 5 and 26-4-1872, *Briefe*, cit., 5.

²¹ As pointed out by Laura Bazzicalupo: «It is understood that, although historically ineffective and 'outdated', Burckhardt's political preference goes to that small, citizen state which, after 1870 and the unification process accompanied by the nationalistic rhetoric of Italy and Germany, goes absolutely against the tide» (L. BAZZICALUPO, *Il potere e la cultura. Sulle riflessioni storico-politiche di Jakob Burckhardt*, cit., p. 136).

²² According to Laura Bazzicalupo, «Burckhardt refers to the somewhat disarmed, pluralist, inevitably federal political conception of the citizen-regional state. In this regard, we could also say that he supports pluralism, the multiplication of the centres of power, which will be an important response, on the part of politics and part of the early twentieth-century public law, to the crisis of the State deriving from internal conflicts and the flourishing of new parties and trade unions that demand the transformation of the old state uniformity» (*ibid.*, p. 137).

²³ J. BURCKHARDT, *Considerazioni sulla storia del mondo*, cit., p. 42.

²⁴ In this regard, according to Burckhardt, today's private person likes to «attach himself to the community in a specific sense as an official», J. BURCKHARDT, *Lezioni sulla storia d'Europa*, Italian translation by M. CARPITELLA, Boringhieri, Turin, 1959, pp. 26-27.

citizens are «made aware of the main issues», and, therefore, «can choose among different options». So, the keystone is, once again, «adequate knowledge»²⁵.

This peculiar form of *knowledge* is linked to that solid cultural background mentioned several times by Burckhardt as a prerequisite for a conscious participation in *public affairs*. The cultural prerequisite which, according to the Author, should be the *participatory soul* of an active citizen, is one of the main reasons why we should look at and appreciate ancient Greece²⁶.

In this regard, in fact, Burckhardt is quite clear when he writes: being «citizens in the fullest sense of the word», is «a goal which the Greek city-state more nearly attained, in spite of the slavery system, than all the republics of today»²⁷.

This reference to the Greek *polis*, therefore, becomes quite significant if linked to the variety of living conditions and opportunities that should stimulate and not hinder human potential²⁸. According to Burckhardt, in fact, a positive judgment on a state depends on the evaluation of the vital intensification and expansion of society and the individuals who are part of it, which can be found in their cultural background²⁹.

The paradigm of a free state emerges, therefore, when the *citizen-state* relationship is established, without undermining the original creativity, shaping the ideal of a diversified *community* as reflected by its own citizens³⁰. So now, getting back to the options mentioned in the introduction, a ‘state-gymnasium’ of authentic participation where citizens have the opportunity to *take part and be part*³¹ of public affairs also by virtue of their personal cultural knowledge.

²⁵ See W. KAEGI, *J. Burckhardt*, cit., VI, I, p. 75.

²⁶ See J. BURCKHARDT, *Storia della civiltà greca*, edited by M. ATTARDO MAGRINI, Sansoni, Florence, 1955.

²⁷ J. BURCKHARDT, *Considerazioni sulla storia del mondo*, cit., p. 42.

²⁸ «The ancient city values human complexity and mutability, it promotes philosophy, science, art without advocating a form of compulsory culture or the culture of sacred books that codify a State’s doctrine», *Ibid.*, p. 88. And also: «Only in a Greek state have the forces of the liberated individual – says Burckhardt – managed to reach the high tension and vibrations evoked by the great works.» (*ibid.*).

²⁹ See L. BAZZICALUPO, *Il potere e la cultura. Sulle riflessioni storico-politiche di Jakob Burckhardt*, p. 140.

³⁰ When he describes the classical era and compares it with the modern era, Burckhardt is even more explicit: «Every individual felt that the polis lived in him. But this omnipotence of the *polis* differs fundamentally from the omnipotence of the modern state. The latter simply wishes that each individual does not escape it, the other demanded that each individual actively served it and was also embarrassed by many things that are now left in the hands of private citizens», J. BURCKHARDT, *Considerazioni sulla storia del mondo*, cit., p. 87.

³¹ See G. SORGI, *Per uno studio della partecipazione politica. Hobbes, Locke, Tocqueville*, cit., p. 30.

5. Harmonious balance?

It seems, therefore, that Burckhardt's thought is characterised by a sort of dualism. On the one hand, in fact, looking at the *liberty of Ancients*, he suggest and promotes a form of positive and proactive collaboration in public affairs, almost idealising it as a reference to the Greek *polis*. A participation desired by citizens who have the opportunity, but also have the responsibility to have their say in the public decisions of the *agora*. On the other, making reference to the *liberty of the moderns*³², he considers the possibility of not being involved in public affairs, unless they have a certain relevance, to devote himself exclusively to his *private life*, which still means freedom of choice³³.

But we must be careful, as even the Greek *polis* can degenerate into a tyranny. And a state can also overstep the limits and ignore personal aspirations, abilities, interests. All the more so if this process of asphyxiation takes place in a growing climate of cultural massification³⁴. In this case, too much interference by the public institution should provoke the moral condemnation of private citizens who have built a certain intellectual background. And freedom could manifest itself by «scission», by «subtraction»³⁵. Therefore, not that participation and direct political activity promoted by *small states*, but, as in *big states*, retirement from *public life*. Deciding *not to participate*, in this case, means not recognising a massive political-social system, not supporting and not legitimating it³⁶.

³² See B. CONSTANT, *La libertà degli antichi paragonata a quella dei moderni*, cit.

³³ In this regard, Laura Bazzicalupo clarifies, once again, Burckhardt's position: «Liberty of Ancients as a positive collaboration, active participation in public affairs, a mark that individuals must leave on the public decisions of the *agora*; halved liberty of the moderns, confined to the private sphere, to conscience and subjective morality, negative liberty as non-involvement in public power, which manages our non-private dimension, with totalitarian exclusivity: 'materially', that is, superficially, without asking for any particular spiritual consent, indifferent to individual thought», L. BAZZICALUPO, *Il potere e la cultura. Sulle riflessioni storico-politiche di Jakob Burckhardt*, cit., pp. 139-140.

³⁴ As Burckhardt writes: «This horrific general knowledge, which, now and then, adds a little salt to the pile, a new trend that builds, every day, an entire factory of conventional opinions, and, therefore, of illusions which are dumped, then, on the entire society. The fact that a man can train based on his needs only is not even imaginable. The misery of our times is unbearable [...] they need a common seal so that everyone can still participate in this confusion that is called modern life. Those few eccentrics who endure this attitude with no salvation without succumbing are mocked by all for trying to become emancipated». (Lett. a Schauenburg, *Briefe*, cit., 3, pp. 57-58).

³⁵ L. BAZZICALUPO, *Il potere e la cultura. Sulle riflessioni storico-politiche di Jakob Burckhardt*, cit., p. 147.

³⁶ One could question whether this position is, in some ways, a form of *disobedience* or not. Some interesting studies conducted by Teresa Serra focused on this issue, in particular on the current crisis of democracy, including: T. SERRA, *Dissenso e democrazia. La disobbedienza civile*, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, Rome, 2010.

So, when Burckhardt says «Politics is dead to me; what I do is just what a man should do»³⁷, he is clearly and *cynically*³⁸ rejecting active politics.

It is not just an escape into his «inner reality, far from the centres of power»³⁹, but, as pointed out by Bazzicalupo, a «painful reconsideration of the current political action»⁴⁰.

³⁷ Lett. a Kindel, 6-12-1846, *Briefe*, cit.

³⁸ See Karl Löwith who compared Burckhardt's attitude of renunciation to Diogenes' cynicism, K. LÖWITH, *Jacob Burckhardt: l'uomo nel mezzo della storia*, cit., pp. 155 and subsequent.

³⁹ J. BURCKHARDT, *Lezioni sulla storia d'Europa*, cit., p. 27.

⁴⁰ See L. BAZZICALUPO, *Il potere e la cultura. Sulle riflessioni storico-politiche di Jakob Burckhardt*, cit., p. 147, note 47.



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