

Are We at the Beginning of an Age of Barbarism?

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) was one of the most significant philosophers of history of the modern era. In his major work [The New Science](#) (1725), Vico famously outlined what he believed to be the recurring cycle of human civilizations (using Greece and Rome as his primary examples), and his outline of the three ages of this cycle may have some applications to us today... to say the least.

The first age, according to Vico, is the “age of gods,” in which the language of poetry is dominant and people primarily live in patriarchal communities and are ruled over by priest-kings.

Then, there is the “age of heroes,” in which the lower classes rise to become plebians, and the priest-kings transform into heroes (a la the Homeric epics) and aristocrats.

The third age is the “age of peoples”: an age of increased democracy in which the plebians grow in power through class wars, and man emphasizes the power of reason and science. As Vico summarizes the three ages: “First the woods, then cultivated fields and huts, next little houses and villages, thence cities, finally academies and philosophers”

But, as Dr. Alexander Bertland [writes](#) of this third age,

“Unfortunately, while this conceptual wisdom gives the plebeians their freedom, it undermines the cultural unity provided by poetic wisdom. While all in society become free and equal, the religious inspiration to work for the common good rather than the individual becomes lost. Society eventually splinters into a barbarism of reflection in which civil wars are fought solely for personal gain. This is the

barbarism of reflection which returns society to its origin.”



[*Giambattista Vico*]

Vico concludes his work with a description of this “barbarism of reflection” that may be disturbing to some of you for its familiarity:

“But if the peoples are rotting in this last civil illness and cannot agree upon a monarch from within, and are not conquered and preserved by better nations from without, then providence for their extreme ill has its extreme remedy at hand. For such peoples, like so many beasts, have fallen into the custom of each man thinking only of his own private interests and have reached the extreme of delicacy, or better of pride, in which like wild animals they bristle and lash out at the slightest displeasure. Thus in the midst of their greatest festivities, though physically thronging together, they live like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will, scarcely any two being able to agree since each follows his own pleasure or caprice. By reason of all this, providence decrees that, through obstinate factions and desperate civil wars, they shall turn their cities into forests and the forests into dens and lairs of men. In this way, through long centuries of barbarism, rust will consume the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned them into beasts made more inhuman by the barbarism of reflection than the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense [the barbarism of the first two ages]. For the latter displayed a generous savagery, against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on one’s guard; but the former, with a base savagery, under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates. Hence peoples who have reached this point of premeditated malice, when they receive this last remedy of providence and are thereby stunned and brutalized, are sensible no longer of comforts, delicacies, pleasures and

pomp, but only of the sheer necessities of life. And the few survivors in the midst of an abundance of the things necessary for life naturally become well behaved and, returning to the primitive simplicity of the first world of peoples, are again religious, truthful and faithful. Thus providence brings back among them the piety, faith and truth which are the natural foundations of justice as well as the graces and beauties of the eternal order of God."