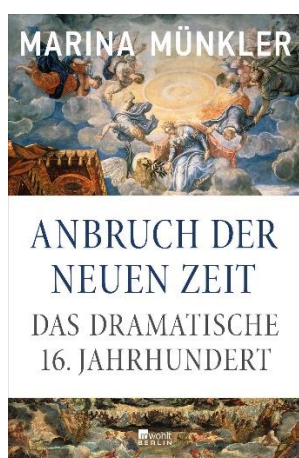


Marina Münkler
The Dawn of the Modern Era: The Dramatic 16th Century

April 2024, 544 pages, Copyright © 2024 by Rowohlt•Berlin Verlag GmbH, Berlin

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Prologue

The 16th century was an era of fundamental change and extreme tensions. It was the century in which Europe took over the world while still perceiving itself as threatened and persecuted, even in the farthest reaches of the globe. The century was marked by three major lines of conflict: the advance of the Spanish and Portuguese into the American continent and the Indian Ocean, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, and the disintegration of Christendom into two irreconcilably opposing camps in the wake of the Reformation. For a long time, the resulting tensions did not play a role in Europe's self-perception. The historians Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt spoke of the "discovery of the world and of man" in their emphatic descriptions of the Renaissance, thus establishing the pathos of the discoverer as a heroic conqueror of seemingly insurmountable boundaries. They painted an image of the Renaissance that was consistently positive, attributing qualities such as curiosity, inspiration, and openness to the Europeans. Even the word "Renaissance" (rebirth), which Italian humanists invented to distinguish their era, was emotionally charged with discovery: first with the rediscovery of ancient texts, but also with the discovery of "man" in the scholarly movement of humanism and the voyages to the new world. Under the dominance of this feeling, the conqueror sailed in the slipstream of the explorer and participated in his fame.

This view has not been able to withstand the critical scrutiny that has become commonplace since the onset of decolonization after the Second World War. For a while, the positive view of the explorer continued to dominate, and the conqueror was increasingly negatively distinguished from him. Only since the 1980s has colonial historiography come to realize that explorers like Christopher Columbus and conquerors like Hernán Cortés belong together – like two sides of the same coin. Nevertheless, the explorer still enjoys a much better reputation than the conqueror. Seen as battling against the odds, and despite a lack of recognition, the discoverer is purportedly endowed with the qualities of inspiration, daring, and steadfastness. The conqueror, on the other hand, serves as the prototype of bad qualities: someone characterized by greed, brutality, cruelty, and slyness. Whenever the conqueror receives his due, it is primarily for the strategic skill and ingenuity with which he was able to compensate for numerical inferiority and logistical deficits. On closer historical examination, however, no one could fail to see that explorers and conquerors were not only closely connected, but often one and the same person, and that from the beginning the explorer was eager to take possession of the land he discovered, that he could transform himself into a conqueror at

any time, and that, conversely, most conquerors had previously discovered the territory they conquered. Nevertheless, the view of the explorer as a boundary-breaking pioneer in contrast to the boundary-violating conqueror remained dominant; and even these boundary violations were often justified – not least with the argument of the spread of the Christian faith, which was assumed to save the souls of the erstwhile nonbelievers.

But while Christianity was expanding more or less violently in the New World, its unity in the Old World was shattered because an Augustinian monk in the German provinces had drawn conclusions from his reflections on God and the world – the substance of which had long since been in progress – and had discovered the freedom of God, before which all human certainty crumbled to dust. This was especially true of the assurances of salvation established by the Roman Church. With their indulgences, pilgrimages, relics, and saints, the Roman Church had made it possible for people to maintain a permanent process of negotiation with the divine judge, making a path to God beyond the Church and its religious practices unthinkable. Luther countered this with a book and a certainty that the individual had to find within himself: the Bible and faith. In doing so, he shook the foundations of Christianity and exposed himself to persecution as a heretic. When, in 1521, he anxiously travelled from Wittenberg to the Diet of Worms, where – after the Pope had banished him the year before – an imperial ban awaited him, he could not be sure that he would leave the city alive. But apart from his trust in God, he was also able to draw courage from the fact that he was met by a tremendous wave of enthusiasm on the way: In Erfurt, the rector of the university, the renowned humanist Crotus Rubianus, rode up to meet him with forty others and ceremoniously greeted him. The Erfurt Latinist and neo-Latin poet Helius Eobanus Hessus wrote several elegies to Luther, praising him not only as a new Hercules who had come to clean out Christ's sheepfold, but also as the one who would “restore Christendom to its rightful name.” In Frankfurt, a patrician woman even greeted Luther as the herald of a new era and a new beginning, which she celebrated euphorically. But while some were seized with the spirit of a new dawn, others thought the end of the world was nigh should they fail to quash the “heretical” movement that Luther had unleashed, or to drive it back into the bosom of the Church that alone brought salvation.

All in all, the dawn of the new era was by no means understood as something fundamentally positive. Instead, apocalyptic ideas dominated. The modern age was often understood rather as an end time than as a new beginning. In particular, this had to do with the demolition of the old. The Protestant rejection of the veneration of saints and Luther's ridicule of the legends of the saints as liars (*Legenden – Lügenden*) not only emptied the heavens, but also shook the foundations of faith

and piety. Before the Reformation, the Christian world's very own conception of time had been deeply interwoven with the saints. Every day of the year was dedicated to a saint, every city, every church, had its own saint, and for every illness and every emergency there was a saint to whom one could appeal for help. Indeed, every sin could be forgiven through the intercession of the Most Holy of Saints, Mary, the Mother of God. An attack against this kind of veneration was an attack upon the existing practice of piety. The controversy over the saints was therefore one of the most bitter battlegrounds in the conflict between the emerging Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church – a conflict that was fought not only in the Old World, but soon in the New World as well.

Numerous certainties were thus condemned to hell, the social order itself appeared to be on the brink of faltering, and the antagonisms that arose from these conflicts were voiced with extreme polemical sharpness. Insults, disparagement, vilification, and defamation characterized the controversies between Catholics and Protestants, which often ended in violence. All conflicts were now carried out in the open, as the Latin language lost its supremacy in religious and political discourse. The disputes “gripped the masses” because they were conducted in the vernacular, and for the first time something like a “public sphere” emerged. In these fermentation processes, the production and dissemination of texts also came under unprecedented pressure to remain up-to-date. The confessional struggles over the true religion produced a flood of polemics, pamphlets, and flyers calling on everyone to join one side or the other. The conquest of the New World also produced a steady flow of *Americana* with reports from the New World. At the same time, the pressure to confess a particular faith led to a steep increase in the number of testimonial documents, such as autobiographies, diaries, and letters. The lower classes became part of literature, both as authors and as protagonists. In the Reformation dialogue, for example, the peasant confidently confronted the cleric. Moreover, the chivalrous world lost its supremacy, despite numerous attempts to make its model character appear in new splendour, for example, in Ariosto's epic *Orlando Furioso* (*The Raging Roland*), a love story linked to the idea of the crusade, or in the novel *Amadis of Gaul*, which once again presented the image of a perfect knight.

The swansong to the chivalry of the perfect knight in Cervantes's *Don Quixote* caricatured what had become abundantly clear in the wars with the Ottomans as well as in the military campaigns in the New World: The age of chivalrous battles had ended; the era of cannons and massacres was coming. Although the conquerors tried to portray themselves as knights, they could not deny the foundation of their successes: devious alliances and ruthless violence. In literature, this went hand

in hand with the discovery of the negative hero, who was no longer oriented towards the “common good” of an estate society, but was intent on the ruthless enforcement of his interests, which could scarcely be bridled, even by comedy – just think, for example, of the popular prankster *novel Till Eulenspiegel* or the Spanish *picaresque* novels with their rustically cunning and immoral protagonists. Visual arts, such as those of the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel, also discovered the lower classes and their everyday lives in genre painting. Particularly the copper engravings of the time also show the ugly and reprehensible. With their mixture of seductive beauty and repulsive ugliness, they tapped into a pictorial reservoir of fears and threats ranging from the man-eating “cannibals,” depicted in the illustrations of travelogues and maps, to the “witches” portrayed by Hans Baldung Grien, among others. “Cannibals” and “witches” now seemed to populate the world. What these images and texts conveyed as dangerous was the perceived threat to the entire order; within the territory of the empire at the end of the 16th century, both Catholics and Protestants reacted to this threat with the first wave of witch hunts (from 1580 to 1590).

In addition, there were attempts everywhere to create or restore order through various means: with the scientific innovation of astronomy, which initially focused on the “salvation of phenomena” (Jürgen Mittelstrass) but then developed into a new heliocentric view of the world (Copernicus) that received striking proof after Galileo Galilei’s discovery of Jupiter’s moons, which Johannes Kepler transformed into a coherent theory; with the systematic organization of power-knowledge fostering the domination over distant territories, from which the description of the state and statistics were then derived; with emerging international law, which provided a legal framework for European expansion; with the grammars that sought to create an order of vernacular languages; and with the new disciplinary regimes, developed not only by the respective authorities. Political settlements, such as the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), which divided the so-called New World between Spain and Portugal, and treaties between the conflicting confessional parties, such as the Peace of Augsburg (1555), were also intended to restore order. However, most of these agreements and contracts turned out to be fragile and often fuelled the conflicts they were supposed to put an end to. In the 16th century, order and chaos, self-assurance and deep uncertainty, the consciousness of a new era and the looming sense of the last days, consolidation and upheaval, daring and despair, were not only juxtaposed to one another but also intermingle in a way that makes the century appear as an alchemical laboratory from which new forms of life and orders of knowledge would emerge.

This dynamic also found its way into language. The 16th century coined a number of new words

or changed the meaning of old ones in a manner that is still characteristic of our language today. The “New World,” “America,” and “cannibals” were new creations in the 16th century. Other words, although older, took on a different meaning at the time. These include the terms “savages” or “barbarians” for the indigenous peoples of the American continent as well as for the Ottomans; their pejorative tenor is immediately clear, but the word “Turks,” used for all members of the Ottoman Empire, is not immediately recognizable as derogatory. The Ottoman Empire was a multi-ethnic realm whose senior authorities and military personnel were largely (forcibly) recruited from Europeans. Equating their empire with an ethnicity that was inextricably linked to “barbarism,” “cruelty,” and “tyranny” helped to shape an image that remains influential today.

Such words reveal a Eurocentric perspective whose formative connotations are so multifaceted that they are currently still worth pursuing. The Eurocentric perspective was prevalent already in the 16th century, not only because the Europeans were striving for and asserting domination over the world – with massive consequences for the indigenous population of the New World – but also because they saw themselves as threatened: from the outside, by the Ottomans, and from within, by the division of Christendom. The idea of Europe as a cultural entity, first developed by the humanists, arose from a sense of threat that is still active. On the other hand, there was hardly any period in European history where the rights of non-Europeans were defended more decisively than in 16th century Europe. The provisions of the laws of nations, some of which are still in force in international law today, were substantially established in the 16th century.

Even without superficial contemporisations, many of the features of the 16th century seem to be highly topical these days: the battle over words, the struggle for the domination of discourses, and the conflicts over the power of images. It is undoubtedly no coincidence that these disputes were accompanied by a change in media that began with the invention of the printing press in the mid-15th century but did not unfold its true power until the 16th century. What was once intended to produce a perfect Bible later proved to be the ideal prerequisite for the production of much more short-lived publications. Pamphlets and leaflets became the media suitable not only for the rapid dissemination of news, but also for the most diverse kinds of disparaging communication. What can be observed again today also applies to the 16th century: The most abusive speech, the most vicious puns, the vilest accusations generate the greatest attention and thus form the dominant mode of communication, which effortlessly overcomes social boundaries as well as the boundaries of education. The learned doctor can express himself no less disparagingly than the

“peasant ruffian.”

Not all of these processes began in the 16th century; nor did they find their conclusion in it. As a rule, the 16th century is combined with the 17th and 18th centuries under the term “Early Modern Period,” and the 16th century is more likely to be understood as a nameless epoch followed by the more notable ones, such as the Baroque, the Rococo, or the Enlightenment. Sometimes it is also referred to as the late Renaissance. Yet the focus on the first century of the early modern period is justified by the extremely intricate context of different movements that make it a dramatic century – from the discovery and conquest of the American continent to the escalation of the conflicts that arose at the beginning of the 17th century, eventually leading to the ‘Thirty Years’ War. The 16th century never experienced a war like the one extending from 1618 to 1648, but the military conflicts were so numerous and diverse – from the wars of hegemony between France and the Habsburgs to the confessional wars between Catholics and Protestants, to the wars against the Ottomans and the wars of conquest in the New World, just to name a few – that it could also be referred to as a century of wars.

To take this into account, however, presupposes that one considers the 16th century not from the point of view of its crowning achievements in art, literature, and political thought, and thus not with a focus on Dürer, Michelangelo, and Titian, or on Shakespeare and Cervantes, or on Machiavelli and Bodin. Such a perspective on the 16th century may be instructive, but it would overlook the fundamental lines of conflict of the era. In the disputes over the “savages,” the “saints,” and the “Turks” we can recognise the 16th century as a thoroughly dramatic epoch: the dawn of the modern era as a beginning that already carries its own end within it.

Epilogue

By the end of the 16th century, the Spanish dream of world domination had come to an end. The motto of Philip II – *Non sufficit orbis* (“The world is not enough”) – could hardly conceal the fact that, despite the enormous imports of gold and silver from America, it was not the world but the money that was not sufficient. Philip, who had ascended the royal throne in 1556 as the successor of his father Charles V, but did not succeed him to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire, had to declare bankruptcy several times during his reign: in 1557, in 1575, and again in 1596. The globalized economy, for which the indigenous peoples of Africa and America had to pay the highest price, was ultimately an economic failure for Spain, in spite of the enormous plunder extracted from the two continents. Philip’s attempt to dominate the New World and Europe and to bind the latter much more closely to Spain than had been the case under Charles V, in addition to his uncompromising policy of re-Catholicization, had led Spain into renewed wars against France and stoked the revolt in the northern Netherlands. In 1580, Philip succeeded in taking over Portugal, which brought the lucrative Portuguese spice trade under his control. But under Elizabeth I, England had begun to pillage Spanish silver transports from the New World and to support Protestants in France and the rebellious Netherlands, challenging Spain’s supremacy in Europe as well as on the world’s oceans. Philip’s attempt to eliminate English competition resulted in the defeat of the Armada off the English coast in 1588, which, like the victory in the Battle of Lepanto, did not prove decisive yet devoured huge sums of money.

Although Spain and Portugal were increasingly replaced by England and the Netherlands as the leading seafaring nations, Europe controlled the oceans without restriction and had thus inherited a maritime dominance that replaced the age of land domination. For the indigenous populations of the New World, this was not a change for the better. The considerations of international law developed in the 16th century, some of which still form important argumentative foundations of international law today, did not alter the outcome. In South America, the Spaniards continued to rule; in North America, the Protestant English gradually settled and dominated the land they wrested from the indigenous peoples.

But it was primarily the Europeans who were able to gain a number of scientific innovations from the discovery and conquest of the New World and from their confrontation with the Ottomans. In the course of the 16th century, Europe had charted large parts of the maritime world. Navigators and cartographers had surveyed almost every coastline; and with the help of

their celestial observations, they had developed a previously unimaginable ability to pinpoint their location anywhere in the world with relative precision. Curiously, this led to difficulties in locating the Earth, which since ancient times had been thought to float in the centre of the universe, with the sun and planets moving in perfect circular orbits around it. This idea was contradicted by the large amount of navigational data generated by Columbus's first voyage to America and by Ferdinand Magellan's first and Sir Francis Drake's second circumnavigation of the earth, all of which were based on the calculation of the respective positions of their ships using an astrolabe and Jacob's staff. For a long time, attempts had been made to "save the phenomena" with the help of complex calculations, but at the same time various inventors improved their observational skills to such an extent that the phenomena could be understood more precisely. This resulted in decisive changes in astronomy since the middle of the 16th century. In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus dismissed the geocentric view of the cosmos, declaring that it was not the earth that was at the centre of the universe but the sun. Over the next few decades, the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe published the data of his precise observations of stellar orbits. In 1609, Galileo Galilei succeeded in confirming the Copernican heliocentric view with the discovery of Jupiter's moons. He had achieved this with the help of the telescope, whose importance for astronomical observation he had initially esteemed far less highly than its usefulness for seafaring and warfare. Almost at the same time, Johannes Kepler described the orbits of the planets as ellipses, which were influenced by the gravitational pull of the sun located in the middle of the universe, thus transforming the available motion data of the celestial bodies into a coherent view of the cosmos. The difficulty of correctly describing the movements of the stars and creating a world view was not completely solved, but Kepler had taken the decisive step.

In the 16th century, problems similar to those in astronomy were also encountered with other data. From the beginning of the conquest of the New World, the Spanish kings had demanded not only that everyone who travelled there describe what they saw; they had also demanded that the *encomenderos* itemize how many people lived there, the size of the country they ruled, what products it produced, how many buildings there were, and so on. The huge number of reports soon overwhelmed the processing and storage capacities of the Spanish crown. This inevitably meant that the information provided had to be organized and standardized in order to be assimilated. The proposed systematization had to be taken into account as the information was being obtained because it would not have been possible to record in lists afterwards what had not been precisely recorded before. The resulting system of knowledge derived by survey was perfected under

Philip II in particular; in it, data rather than depictions came to dominate. The description of countries was displaced by statistics.

Freight entering Europe in the century of discoveries and conquests was also enumerated and documented. Whether stolen directly from the indigenous people of the American continent or extracted by coercive mining, the gold and silver poured into the Old World from the New, along with a steady flow of cult and art objects, including the most valuable articles of skilful New World craftsmanship, a source of endless astonishment. Albrecht Dürer encountered such extraordinary works of art as early as 1519 on his trip to the Netherlands. In Brussels, he inspected what Hernán Cortés had sent from the Aztec Empire to King Charles I of Spain, for the Spanish monarch had brought these treasures with him to Flanders on his way to the imperial election in Aachen and had exhibited them in the city. In his *Diary of a Journey to the Netherlands*, Dürer noted that he had never seen things in his life that had made his heart so happy. He praised the inventiveness of these “people in foreign lands.”

In addition to the gold and works of art, the biodiversity of the New World – the colourful parrots and the peculiar reptiles, fish, and wild animals that had never been seen before in Europe – also made an impression. In order to store all these astonishing things, both to exhibit what they had found and to represent their vast dominion, specially created rooms were required. People wanted to collect such artefacts, to publicly display them, compare them, measure them and marvel at them. What was still housed randomly in the first decades of the 16th century found its place from the second half onwards in specially furnished rooms, which were called *cabinets des curiosités* in France and *Wunderkammern* or *Raritätenkabinette* in the German-speaking world. Here you could assemble everything you had acquired, found, or stolen, along with the instruments needed to find them: the gold masks, feather shields, dyes, stuffed crocodiles, cormorants, and parrots; the astrolabes, armillary spheres, telescopes, and much more. In Protestant areas, the cabinets of curiosities often displaced the reliquaries: the remains of the saints yielded to the astonishing artefacts by which the greatness and diversity of God’s creation could be measured. With these objects and artefacts, a dominated and exploited world migrated to Europe – an early form of the ethnological and natural history museum, which, from today’s perspective, is often regarded as one of the problematic innovations of the 16th century.

Other innovations were less spectacular and dubious, although they too bore the hallmarks of the disparagement towards the foreigner so characteristic of the 16th century. In the course of the century, numerous dictionary projects were developed throughout Europe, raising the status of

vernacular languages and transferring them into the realm of scholarly knowledge in both Latin-vernacular dictionaries and monolingual Latin or vernacular lexicons with word explanations. “Barbarians,” “cannibals,” “savages,” “Turks,” – all this had to be explained, and much else, too. In France, the famous humanist Robert Estienne pioneered the documentation of the world in dictionaries, followed by lexicographers throughout Europe. The Turks made it into the dictionaries most often, usually with disparaging explanations. In his multilingual dictionary *Sylva Quinquelinguis*, a cornucopian vocabulary in five languages published in 1592, Helfrich Emmel declared that the Turks were a terrible, cruel, and inhuman people, the worst enemy of the Christian faith.

Occasionally, however, the Turks also served as a role model, albeit unacknowledged. In order to hold their own against the Spanish armies, the leader of the rebellious Netherlands, William of Orange, and his son Maurice of Nassau-Orange developed a military reform in which a regularly paid, well-trained, and constantly drilled standing army replaced the mercenary bands. Indirectly, the experience with the Ottomans had also contributed to this reform: Despite the constant talk of the disorder and cruelty of Ottoman warfare, Europeans had come to appreciate how much more effective the systematically trained troops such as the janissaries were, how much more skilfully they could act on the battlefield, and how much more precisely they had mastered the combination of artillery, infantry, and cavalry. Although the Orange army reformers did not explicitly refer to the Ottomans, referring rather to ancient Rome, the disciplined standing army of the Ottomans embodied everything that humanist Dutch military theorists such as Justus Lipsius sought to achieve.

From the point of view of scientific, technical, and military innovations, the 16th century was a period of assiduous study. But the resulting innovations should not obscure the fact that it remained an era of hateful communication, of insult and disparagement, and of mutual accusations. The fierce journalistic exchange of blows about the “Turks” and the Reformation movement itself was only made possible by the increasing use of a technical innovation: the expansion of the printing press for pamphlets and leaflets. These innovations turned the 16th century into an age of persecution. Protestants and Catholics, for the most part, confronted each other in deep hatred, reviling each other as veritable “Turks” or “cannibals” and waging war against each other. Finally, in the last quarter of the century, the “witch” became the notorious fiendish product of these conflicts.

The family of astronomer Johannes Kepler illustrates just how closely interwoven religious wars,

witch hunts, and scientific innovations could be during the transition from the 16th to the 17th century. In 1574, Kepler's father, Henry Kepler, left his wife Katharina and his two-year-old son Johannes in order to serve as a mercenary. And although he was a Protestant, he was recruited by the Spaniards under Duke Alba to fight against the rebellious Netherlands. In desperation, Katharina travelled after him, attempting to lure him back home, which she succeeded in doing, but only for a short time. Soon he went off to war again and eventually died. As an adult, the astronomer Johannes Kepler still explained his father's warlike tendencies astrologically: The constellation between Saturn and Mars, which prevailed at the birth of his father, led to his father's belligerence. For his mother, however, this zeal for war was not only fatal for economic reasons. When she was accused of being a witch in 1615, one of the charges she faced was that she had driven her husband out of the house with her "demonic work" – and he had died wretchedly at war because of it. The ensuing witch trial was a disaster not only for Kepler's mother; in order to dismiss the charges, Kepler presented a long statement in her defence with the help of several lawyers, while commuting back and forth from Linz, where he was living at the time, to Württemberg, where his mother was on trial. In places, his arguments were similar to those of his mother's persecutors, as when he raises accusations against the witnesses of the prosecution in order to exonerate his mother. The trial ended favourably. Katharina resisted the torture and was acquitted, but she survived the detention for only half a year.

Shortly thereafter, the 'Thirty Years' War began. Johannes Kepler, the great astronomer and probably the most important scientist of the 16th century, who had always wanted to avoid engaging in military conflict, entered the service of General Albrecht von Wallenstein as an astrologer. It was to be the largest war in Europe to date and an escalation of the religious and ideological conflicts that had preceded it. The Old World was laid to waste by the very technical and military innovations that enabled destruction.