In the course of the Renaissance’s long historiography, the most influential work has doubtless been Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*. Burckhardt’s fundamental assumption was that the Renaissance constituted a new and distinct period in the history of culture. His aim was to portray the epoch not in terms of detailed narrative but rather topically, to depict the period’s mentality, to delineate the spirit of the age: his purpose was to discover the common features of the Renaissance, what was typical of its culture. Burckhardt’s attempt to portray the Renaissance as a homogeneous period, although powerfully compelling, has been repeatedly criticised, particularly for over-simplifying and distorting historical evidence. It has become obvious that, during the Renaissance, social, political and cultural developments were far too diffuse and complex to admit of such simplistic harmonisation as is suggested by Burckhardt.

If the Renaissance was not a period of history in the Burckhardtian sense, then perhaps, as Ernst Gombrich has suggested, it was a movement.¹ *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines a movement as ‘a series of actions and endeavours by a body of persons, tending more or less continuously towards some special end’. It could be argued that the ‘special end’ of the Renaissance was the revival of classical learning, which was thought to have been eclipsed during the barbarous Middle Ages. Movements work ‘continuously’ towards their ends; in other words one follower converts his contemporaries and so on. It could be suggested that Petrarch, the first great Renaissance man, communicated to contemporaries such as Boccaccio his enthusiasm for the classical revival and together they handed on the torch to the next generation in the person of Coluccio Salutati, who in turn inspired younger men such as Niccolò Niccoli, Leonardo Bruni and Poggio.

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Bracciolini. Most important, movements are the work of a ‘body of persons’, and the protagonists of the Renaissance soon acquired a special name: humanists, who were, in contemporary parlance, not lovers of humanity or devotees of man rather than God but simply teachers or students of the humanities (known from the fourteenth century as the studia humanitatis), or, in modern terms, the classics.

Gombrich was famously anti-Burckhardtian and anti-Hegelian (he brilliantly identified Hegel’s spirit of the age as the source of Burckhardt’s renowned dictum, ‘Every period of civilization which forms a complete and consistent whole manifests itself not only in political life, in religion, art and science, but also sets its characteristic stamp on social life’), and yet Gombrich’s definition retains one essential Burckhardtian feature: its tendency to homogenise. To interpret the Renaissance as a movement is to highlight its coherence. This is clear, for example, in an excellent short treatment of the Renaissance by Peter Burke, first published in 1987:

In this essay, the Renaissance has been defined rather more narrowly than it was by Burckhardt. It has been considered, to use Gombrich’s useful distinction, as a ‘movement’ rather than as a ‘period’. Even as a movement, it has been circumscribed fairly tightly, with an emphasis…on the attempt to revive antiquity, rather than on the other kinds of cultural change to which Burckhardt and many other historians have drawn attention.3

It would be unfair to suggest that Burke overlooks the movement’s diversity: ‘the revival of antiquity did not have the same meaning for every social group. It meant something different in Florence, Rome, Venice and so on.’4 Nevertheless, portraying the Renaissance as a movement inevitably involves accenting similarity rather than difference: like a Burckhardtian period with its characteristic spirit of the age, a movement—to be recognisable—has to have some kind of coherence. Indeed, for Burke, the Renaissance ceased to exist when the movement disintegrated:

End is too sharp, too decisive a word. A better term, because it is a more precise one, might be ‘disintegration’. The point is that what began as a movement of a few people with clear aims gradually lost its unity as it

2 E. Gombrich, In search.
4 Ibid., 25.