

# How did Humanism during the Renaissance Impact Economic Growth in Italy?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the significance of Humanism - a philosophy that emphasises human efforts, skills and development often over religious or supernatural beliefs - and its effect on countries and their economies. This paper focuses on the Renaissance era in Italy when Humanism emerged. The paper determines that Humanism was a factor in the development of the country itself; economically, socially and politically. However; when viewed from a greater lens, it is understood that Humanism did not have a significant impact on the expected state of the country's economy compared to other countries of the same period. These countries were not as greatly influenced by Humanism during the time and had economic states similar to Italy's if not better. This paper also discusses the various other economic factors that Humanism contributed to or assisted in such as employment of supply-side policies, increases in production, GDP per capita and literacy rate: all factors that further led to economic growth.

Keywords: Humanism; Italy; Economic Growth; Renaissance; Europe

## INTRODUCTION

The Renaissance, the French word for "rebirth", was an era that lasted between the 14th and the 17th century in the European continent. Though it originated during the beginning of the 14th century in Italy, its impact was widely spread across the European continent around the

late 15th century after the introduction of the printing press in 1440 (1). The era emerged in Florence, Italy, succeeding the Middle Ages.

The era emerged shortly after the fall of Constantinople, formerly the capital of the Byzantine Empire and later of the Ottoman Empire. The fall of the capital led several Greek scholars to flee to Italy along with various documents and manuscripts from the Classical era (1). This led to the rediscovery of various Classical literature and learnings which further led to the establishment of interest in the Classical aspects of various subjects and fields such as the arts, literature, philosophy, mathematics and much more (2). This discovery provided the foundation for Humanism

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**Received** June 4, 2025; **Accepted** July 14, 2025  
<https://doi.org/10.70251/HYJR2348.348289>

which later played a significant influence on Italy and its economy. Through this paper, Humanism and its effects on countries such as Italy are explored to determine whether Humanism played a substantial role in the economic growth of Italy during the Renaissance.

## **ITALY AND ITS ECONOMY BEFORE THE RENAISSANCE**

The Medieval era, lasting between the 5th and 15th centuries C.E., preceded the Renaissance era. During this era, several significant events such as the decline of the Roman Empire and the Black Death transformed Italy. One of the many predominant events that occurred during the Medieval era in Italy was the advancement of the economy and commerce across the nation. Cities such as Venice and Genoa developed their trade with the East and the West by trading goods like wood, steel and spices. New merchants and banks emerged during this period. Similarly, new banking techniques and methods were adopted resulting in Italy becoming one of the most prominent economies around the late Middle Ages (3). Hence, during this period, Italy had an urbanisation rate of 18% (4).

However, this development faced a drastic decline in the late 14th century, between 1347 and 1351, due to the Black Death pandemic. The Black Death pandemic was the result of a plague which originated in China. The plague spread across several European nations including Italy, by the Genoese trading ships from Kaffa which made their way across to numerous Mediterranean ports. In Kaffa, the Genoese trading port, the Genoese trading ships faced the army of Kipchak Khan Janibeg who tossed plague-infested corpses of his army into the town to spread the infection (5). The Black Death caused a major fall in Italy's population. The population decline accompanied by existing resources and knowledge increased labour productivity which further led to an increase in incomes and living standards among those who survived (6).

## **HUMANISM AND ITS EFFECTS ON ITALY'S ECONOMY DURING THE RENAISSANCE**

Humanism is a philosophy that emphasises human efforts, skills and development often over religious or supernatural beliefs. During this movement, the societal perspective shifted from religious beliefs to human interests and values which resulted in technological and artistic innovations. Human subjects were now more predominantly represented compared to mythological figures in the arts. The focus of Humanism was on achieving human potential through reason, learning and creativity.

## **Literacy Rate and Human Capital Formation**

Literacy rate, defined as the percentage of the population that can successfully read and write, rose significantly during the Renaissance as education became increasingly valued in Italian society.

Education became more widely available to the general population due to technological innovations such as the printing press (4). Before the Renaissance, between 1200 and 1300, Italy had a literacy rate of around 5% suggesting that education was not as widely accessible as during the 1450s. In 1451, after the emergence of Humanism, Italy's literacy rate was around 15%, tripling over a century. Over the next few years, the literacy rate gradually increased from 15 to 23% (7). The invention of the printing press, accompanied by the desire for knowledge, increased the demand for books. As the demand increased, the production of books per capita simultaneously increased. This is not only seen in Italy but also other European countries where Humanism emerged (8). Scholars conclude that human capital formation measured this way had a strong and positive effect on economic performance, confirming the view of Unified Growth Theory which has underlined the role of human capital for the switch to sustained economic growth (8). In other words, they say that with more individuals reading books, it ends up increasing book production per capita which has a strong, positive effect on increasing the real wages of the country.

In this context, real wages—wages adjusted for inflation—serve as a marker of improved living standards driven by education. The widespread investment in human capital through education functioned as a supply-side policy, aiming to expand aggregate supply by raising the quality and efficiency of labor. Thus, the spread of education not only reflected cultural change but also laid the foundation for long-term economic development.

## **Real GDP and Economic Prosperity**

Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the inflation-adjusted total value of goods and services produced within an economy over a specific period, is another key indicator of economic progress.

The Italian economy was wealthy due to the decline in its population after the Black Death hence allowing individuals and households to enjoy greater incomes and hence higher disposable incomes (2). The increased disposable incomes allowed households to increase their consumption of luxury goods like art (6). Preeminent merchant families such as the Medici used to patronage multiple luxurious art projects. This helped highlight the importance of art in their society and provided various

emerging artists an opportunity to showcase their skills (9). The increased production and consumption of luxury goods established Florence as a center of trade which fostered the advancement of the Italian economy while increasing the real GDP of Italy during the period (6).

GDP per capita is a better measure of economic prosperity. It is the average economic output per individual in a country. GDP per capita acts as a measure of one's living standards hence the higher the GDP per capita, the higher the living standards.

In central-northern Italy, between the years 1300 and 1348, there is a decline in the GDP per capita as during this period, the Black Death pandemic had emerged in Italy causing the population to decrease which resulted in fewer workers hence lower GDPs and incomes causing the living standards of individuals to fall. However, shortly after the plague, the GDP per capita is seen to rise along with the real wages. This was because as the population had decreased after the plague, the GDP decreased as there were less goods and services being produced. This resulted in the GDP per individual in the economy to increase causing the GDP per capita to increase. The GDP per capita is seen to be at its highest during the 1450s or the later Renaissance during which Humanism's effects were more predominantly seen in the economy. More individuals were skilled hence they were occupationally mobile. Occupationally mobile labour is when workers can shift between various jobs and tasks, for instance, they can clean the house and they can also prepare the food. As they were more occupationally mobile, they had more employment opportunities and as Italy's population was still relatively small, the GDP per capita was high (4).

### **Urbanisation Rates**

Urbanisation rate or the annual percentage change in the proportion of a population living in urban areas, also saw an increase stimulated by a rise in trade, innovation and banking that followed the advancement of the Italian economy due to Humanism. Higher urbanisation fuels economic progress by introducing more favourable economic institutions, market rules, ownership protection, laws safeguarding trade and contracts, enhancing workforce mobility, developing private initiative and developing economic rationality (4).

The urbanisation rate of cities in central-northern parts of Italy was nearly 18% in the 14th Century. This region included prominent cities, including Florence, Venice and Milan (4).

However, over the three centuries, despite the 20% fall in the urbanisation rate, these regions were still

able to maintain a relatively high urbanisation rate. The Netherlands also followed this trend; the Netherlands had a literacy rate below 20% between 1475 and 1550 but soon after 1550, when Humanism emerged in the Netherlands, Netherlands' literacy rate increased exponentially to a literacy rate greater than 80% by 1750 (7). This is also supported by the substantial increase in the urbanisation rate of the Netherlands from 0% during the 14th and the 15th century to 17.8% in the 16th century. Hence, demonstrating the significance of Humanism on not only Italy's economy but the economies of other countries as well.

Furthermore, Italy once again became the leading economy in all of Europe in sectors like banking and textile along with the help of innovation and trade. However, it was not an economy that was operating on full employment but it was an economy that was utilising and allocating most of its resources efficiently (4). As mentioned earlier, Italy faced a fall in the urbanisation rate from 16.40% to 14.40% between the 16th and the 17th century, a major factor that caused this decline was the economic depression of the Renaissance. Most cities such as those in central-northern Italy were populated with individuals that were part of either the secondary or the tertiary sector of the economy. In other words, these individuals worked in sectors that either produced finished goods and services using raw materials and resources i.e. secondary sector or retails these finished goods and services to consumers and other businesses i.e. tertiary sector.

As mentioned by Paolo Malanima, there was a fall in population which further led to fewer people demanding luxury products, causing demand to reduce both in Italy and abroad. For a country such as Italy, which specialized in manufacturing high-quality goods and services, this led to a decline in production, leading to reduced employment in these particular sectors. However, rural production of textiles rose, allowing the cotton industry to develop much more in rural areas compared to urbanised areas, hence contributing to the decline in the urbanisation rate of Italy as a whole nation. The southern-island areas of Italy constituted 18.6% of the entire nation's urbanisation rate (4).

### **ANALYSIS OF THE OTHER FACTORS THAT MAY HAVE INFLUENCED ITALY AND ITS ECONOMY**

In order to appropriately assess the impact of Humanism, a study of the other factors that may have

contributed to the economic growth of Italy during these times is needed.

There are various speculations regarding other factors that may have contributed to the state of Italy's economy, one of which being wars. Succeeding the Black Death in Italy (1347-1348), an interstate war named the Petrarch's War occurred, in 1349-1350, between the Ubaldini clan and the Florentines.

The Ubaldini clan seized the important trade routes that connected Florence and Bologna through the Apennine mountains. In May 1349, the Ubaldinis attacked two individuals; Luca Cristani and Mainardo Accursio, two of Francesco Petrarch's close friends, as they travelled through the Apennines. Francesco Petrarch was a renowned humanist poet often credited for contributing to the foundation of the Renaissance. Cristani and Accursio were two of his friends that he wished to live with in the city of Parma, however, due to the attack, Mainardo Accursio was fatally injured. As Petrarch was now bereaved, he wrote a letter to the Florentine officials, urging them to wage war against the Ubaldini (10).

The subject of a letter in book 8 of *The Familiares* showcases the wages and salaries of the military personnel and soldiers while providing an important insight into the state of the Florentine labour force immediately after the Black Death. It is observed that soldiers composed a major part of the labour force in Florence and Italy during the 14th century. The army consisted of two major components; the cavalry and the infantry. The cavalry was composed of foreign and local mercenaries from Germany and Italy while the infantry was segregated into three distinct units: shield bearers, crossbowmen and a unit with members skilled in both crossbow and shield bearing. In late 1348, Florence had 400 horsemen and 600 infantrymen and by 1350, during the second phase of the war, Florence had hired an additional 185 German cavalrymen and 499 infantrymen. Though these were not synonymous with the usual colossal numbers employed during interstate wars, they remained substantial compared to the rest of Florence's workforce at the time (10). After the plague, Florence's population was roughly around 40,000 (11).

The Florentines employed various types of individuals to constitute a part of the army such as sappers, who were engaged in destroying fortifications; masons, who assisted in destruction while also servicing war machines; carpenters, sawyers and blacksmiths; accountants and notaries; couriers and much more, thus creating various employment opportunities for the population. The carpenters, blacksmiths and sawyers were stationed in the town of Scarperia which acted as a camp for the

Florentines to build fortifications and collect supplies for the army. Florence used to deliver raw materials and finished goods to Scarperia. The raw materials sent to Scarperia were supplied by the artisans who worked in the town allowing them to earn large sums of profits along with their wages (10).

Caferro showcases the effect of the Black Death on the labour force and their wages (10). The changes in unit size were one of the many factors that influenced the pay increase (10). Most scholars debate that immediately succeeding the plague, the nominal wages of workers grew substantially: De La Roncière suggested that there was a 160% increase in the nominal wages of masons, a 354% increase in the nominal wages of unskilled labour three years after the plague, a 200% for gardeners between 1350-1356. Similarly, Goldthwaite mentioned that there was a 25% increase in the nominal wages for construction workers and a 19% increase in the nominal wages for unskilled workers. However, this was not always the case as shown by the no change in nominal wages for the cavalrymen. Despite the unit growing in size, the nominal wage did not change (10).

Simultaneously, the effects of the plague were more predominant on the livelihoods of two particular types of individuals: aristocrats and government workers. Aristocrats were severely impacted due to the fall in the value of land and the increase in labour costs. However, to recover their losses, the aristocrats sold their workers as soldiers, hence increasing the number of available cavalrymen seeking employment opportunities. In contrast, government officials and workers in Florence were generally assigned 'base salaries' while state stipendiaries were paid by the government whose revenue was sourced by taxes. Due to the decreased population after the plague, tax revenue also gradually decreased, causing the salaries of such stipendiaries to decrease as well. While such individuals faced a significant decline in their nominal wages, individuals such as artisans, soldiers and agricultural workers saw an increase in their nominal wages (10).

In conclusion, due to such wars, various employment opportunities were provided to individuals after the Black Death where the military force constituted a major part of the Florentine / Italian labour force. Majority of the population was a part of the labour force as; artisans, soldiers, aristocrats and agricultural workers. These individuals saw a substantial increase in their nominal wages allowing their living standards to increase. However, certain groups of individuals such as government workers/officials were negatively impacted due to the plague which

further led to a decline in tax revenue (10). As production increased, real GDP per capita increased (4). The increase in real GDP per capita along with the increase in living standards helped contribute to the nation's economic growth.

## **COMPARISON BETWEEN ITALY'S ECONOMY AND THE ECONOMIES OF OTHER COUNTRIES**

The ideal method to understand the significance of Humanism on a country and its economy would be to compare a few countries without the impact of Humanism to a country with Humanism as this would help the comparison be more effective. However, it is difficult to define countries that were not impacted by Humanism as every country has been affected by the movement at some point. Hence, in this paper, a comparison of Italy to a few other countries that were impacted by Humanism is done. This section discusses the effect of Humanism on the Netherlands and China.

### **Netherlands**

Humanism emerged in the Netherlands during the 16th century, specifically in 1550. The Netherlands also benefited from various developments in societal perspectives and behaviours. Education was spreading across the nation as educational materials were more widely available with Antwerp as one of the prominent centres of new learning and publishing. This increase in the distribution of new learning materials and educational sources allowed education to be widely available across the nation and hence caused the literacy rate to drastically increase between 1550-1750 (12).

Before the emergence of Humanism in the Netherlands, Holland - a small region in the western part of the current Netherlands - was home to a significant economy. This economy was a predominant economy amongst other European countries during the time. During the commencement of the 16th century, the region was heavily urbanized and had one of the greatest urbanisation rates in Europe at the time.

The region had a successful trade across Northern Europe and Southern regions of the Low Countries named Flanders and Brabant. Most of the labour force predominantly worked in non-agricultural sectors such as industry and services and these exports were introduced into the international market in the 14th century during which Holland's agricultural sector faced various challenges. Agriculture declined drastically in the long run due to the rise of difficulties with water tables and

peat soils. However, this did not lead to an increase in emigration in the region. Contrary to other regions of Europe after the Black Death, the population of Holland varied only slightly during the late 14th century (13).

International trade was used as a means through which the Holland government financed its expenses. The Republic imposed tariffs on the imports and exports of goods and furthermore, the tariffs collected were utilised as protectionist methods - methods employed to protect an economy from foreign competition - and to finance warfare at sea (14). Additionally, the government also imposed taxes on goods such as the wholesale of salt, soap and beer. The tax revenue generated was used to cover the costs of certain government bodies in The Hague. One of the most significant impacts seen on the economy of Holland due to the policies imposed on international trade is the blockage of the port route to Antwerp in 1585 and the closing of the Scheldt. This policy resulted in the elimination of the foreign competition, specifically, the Southern Netherlands which encouraged the merchants of Amsterdam and other Dutch regions to maximise their profits (14).

The Netherlands economy was also boosted by its government. The Netherlands employed a decentralized government system where each town had a feudal lord, however the state government was elected by the government. Unlike in other countries, the feudal lord of one town was prevented from influencing their power and political ideas on the entire province. Due to this, each town became specialized in their own products leading to higher product quality. The specialized labour force demonstrates the high literacy rates of the nation. The production of specialized goods and services accompanied by naval routes and rivers assisted in the emergence of trade amongst the regions (15).

The rise in the urbanisation rate from 33% to 45% between 1400 to 1575 may have been influenced by the rise in population (4). Initially, each town did not consist of more than 10,000 inhabitants. However, as more immigrants arrived in Holland and also due to the possible theory that the region of Holland was not as heavily impacted by the Black Death causing fewer deaths compared to the rest of Europe, it was possible to maintain the population (13). This theory was further argued by Joris Roosen and Daniel R. Curtis to be misleading and they further suggested that it must have been either; the increased urban-rural migration in the region or an increase in fertility due to the rise in real wages and a reduced minimum age of marriage after the Black Death era (16).

To summarise, the Netherlands was already a well-off economy with moderate urbanisation rates and active international trade focused on agricultural goods. With the introduction of Humanism, more than 50% urbanisation was achieved and active international trade diversified into specialised goods that were produced owing to specialisations brought in by increased literacy rate amongst the population.

### **China**

According to some scholars, Humanism in China emerged through the rise of the Confucian philosophy between the 6th and 3rd century B.C.E. In China, this form of Humanism resulted in the development of societal perspectives and beliefs. This period promoted the need for social equality and justice and how this can be achieved through various human practices. On the other hand, Humanism in Italy, was a movement that encouraged the fostering of human potential and skills through learning. However, despite having different ideologies, the outcomes of both these periods were similar in certain aspects. But there were some key differences.

Humanism in China led to several economic and social changes. Rulers were expected to lead based on moral values and ensure social stability and harmony and were encouraged to rule with integrity (17). Similarly, this movement impacted educational and social ideals and systems. Families developed new ethics while education grew into high regard which further led to the development of various educational institutions and examinations. In China, education acted as a means through which individuals could develop their morals and ethics into becoming individuals who foster societal equality (18). These learnings and culture are often embodied in traditional Chinese art forms like art, literature and music (16). Overall, intellectual activity and artistic mastery were attained (19).

Chinese Humanism resulted in various economic and administrative reforms as well. A new feudal system with a book-keeping accounting method was introduced allowing the government to keep track of the population and tax collected. The nation was administered by selected individuals with exceptional moral and intellect, trade was heavily taxed while agriculture was encouraged with irrigation and colonisation schemes. Weights and measures were also standardised (19). Fair trade would have occurred therefore, allowing firms and individuals to feel confident regarding the economy hence encouraging investments.

However, Chinese Humanism aimed towards social

advancements over commercial advancements unlike Italian Humanism. Despite not directly influencing commercial advancements, political and social changes such as changes in administration and policies led to a confident economy hence increasing investments resulting in economic welfare.

On the contrary, Italian Humanism was aimed towards commercial advancements through policies that encouraged trade, supply-side policies that improved the quality of labour and goods produced and policies that encouraged investments in the economy.

In summary, the Chinese Humanism was aimed to advance the nation socially by improving morals through policies and governments which indirectly influenced the growth of the nation's economy while Italian Humanism aimed towards improving the nation commercially by focusing on improving individuals' skills and talents into skills that would be more directly beneficial for the economy of the country.

In conclusion, these three countries act as examples that showcase that Humanism does have an impact on the advancement of a country individually in various aspects, however; when viewed from a broader perspective, Humanism does not have a prominent influence on the performance of a country's economy when compared to the economies of other countries during the same period.

### **ITALY'S ECONOMY WITHOUT HUMANISM**

It would be worthwhile to understand what might have been the economic trajectory of Italy without Humanism in order to understand its impact better.

One can postulate that without Humanism, Italy's economy may have had far lesser trade in luxury goods like art and silk. Without the focus on education Italy may have also ended up with a lesser capable bureaucracy that would have hindered economic growth.

With Humanism, demand for luxury goods saw a dramatic increase in Italy and subsequently in the rest of Europe. This demand for luxury goods warranted exotic raw materials like paper, glass, ceramic and silk that Italians learned to produce for themselves and eventually, export (6). This resulted in the establishment of multiple new industries. The growth in luxury crafts sectors increased the demand for artisans and their wages resulting in distribution of wealth (6).

The dominance of Italy in trade and banking got accentuated due to Humanism as well. Humanism brought innovations in banking and higher levels of literacy rates (4). Higher literacy rates produced capable bureaucracies

that enabled laws to facilitate trade and finance.

Higher urbanisation rates resulting from Humanism led to an increase in secondary and tertiary industries (4). This further helped Italy to monopolise its trade in luxury goods and the textile industry comprising silk and wool. The industry improved its competitive advantage in local markets against imports from abroad, it expanded its own markets abroad and finally, reduced its dependence on raw materials imported from abroad (6). This also ensured that products were only produced in Italy leading to multiple employment opportunities being created.

In the absence of Humanism, Italy may have still grown based on its trade and banking but the pace of growth may not have been as high. Also, it may still have been reliant on other countries' imports for its production thereby hampering its overall economic growth.

## CONCLUSION

This paper discusses Humanism and its effects on countries such as Italy and their economies while exploring its impact on the country itself and other similar countries such as China and the Netherlands which were also impacted by the movement. Through this paper, it is evident that Humanism did play a role in the development of the individual country itself; economically, socially and politically. However, from a broader perspective, it did not have a significant influence on the perceived state of the country's economy when compared with other countries of the same period. These countries were not as heavily impacted by Humanism during the time and their economic states were similar if not better. As there were some difficulties in conducting a comparison between a country with Humanism and a country without Humanism, it is ideal that future research focuses on carrying out this comparison to attain more effective data that can help increase understanding of the significance of Humanism.

Humanism led to many changes in the society and the cultural landscape of Italy and other countries. These further impacted the economy of these countries; to economically translate into the following: (A) Humanism assisted in the employment of supply-side policies and hence, increase productive potential by attempting to increase the quantity and quality of existing resources and labour, which contributed to economic growth; (B) Humanism contributed to increases in production and hence resulting in increases in real GDP and GDP per capita which also contributed to economic growth; (C) Humanism assisted in the development of innovations

that spread across the continent some of which resulted in higher literacy rates.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere gratitude to my mentor, Mr. John Fitz-Henley from Princeton University for his guidance and support throughout the creation of this paper.

## FUNDING SOURCES

The author has no funding sources that supported this research and the preparation of this article.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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