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Politics, Identities and the Contemporary Medieval

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Abstract

This essay seeks to draw attention to the central place of the medieval in both the production of knowledge in the broader social sciences and in contemporary politics. Specifically, I do so through a series of examples that show how a concept of ‘the medieval’ is central in both the production of analytical notions of community, and in contemporary political debates about community and identity formation. Both in the social sciences and modern politics, this uniformized and monolithic concept of ‘the medieval’ works not only to constrain how we understand the period but also to limit our ability to imagine and understand politics beyond the nation-state. This centrality, I argue, calls for increased dialogue between scholars of medieval studies and those in other humanities and social science disciplines.

As an International Relations scholar, I am often met with puzzlement when I explain that I work on the Middle Ages.¹ “Is that even possible?” some ask. If the social science discipline of International Relations is broadly concerned with understanding relations among states, international organizations, and other global dynamics, why am I looking at a period and a place with seemingly none of that? Why would we study far-gone pasts? In this short piece I want to address these (only sometimes tacit) questions by drawing attention to the central place of ‘the medieval’ in both the production of knowledge in the broader social sciences and in contemporary politics. Specifically, I do so through a series of examples that show how a concept of ‘the medieval’ is central in both the production of analytical notions of community, and in contemporary political debates about community and identity formation. Both in the social sciences and modern politics, this uniformized and monolithic concept of ‘the medieval’ works not only to constrain how we understand the period, but also to limit our ability to imagine and understand politics beyond the nation-state. This centrality, I argue, calls for increased dialogue between scholars of medieval studies and those in other humanities and social science disciplines.

The Medieval in Social Sciences

From its role in modern philosophy to its use as an inspiration in twentieth-century French thought, the importance of ‘the medieval’ in a variety of other fields has been repeatedly noted (Cole and Smith 2010; Holsinger 2005; Perry and Saltzman 2022). In a book well-known to both medievalists and kindred spirits in other social sciences, Kathleen Davis convincingly argues that at the grounding of modern political order stands an act of periodization that creates the medieval as the other of modernity. Thus, both sovereignty and secularism are less accurate historical descriptors than political acts of conceptualization that rely on the temporalization of a medieval (and colonial) other (2008, see especially 2–6). Her argument is well-known, but the implications of this for most social sciences are hardly fully spelled out. Let me do so.

If the development of social sciences from the nineteenth century onwards was in large part tied to the examination of ‘modern societies,’ the self-description (and creation) of modernity as a temporal and spatial object of study in itself required an act of periodization that created other periods against which modernity could be contrasted, and on the basis of which the core categories for the analysis of the social could be developed (Alexander 2021). Most famously, for example, the analytical vocabulary of social theory about the differentiation of society—the Durkheimian-inspired ideas that societies were differentiated in either a segmentary, a stratificatory, or a functional manner—did not merely consist of abstract conceptual categories but rather relied on a temporal narrative about the historical evolution of society. In this way, the idea of ‘the medieval’ served as one of the paradigms for the development of core concepts such as mechanical solidarity (a particular form of social cohesion), which not only characterized pre-industrial societies but also provided the necessary contrast to the concepts of functional differentiation and organic solidarity as the defining features of modern industrial society and its forms of community (Durkheim 1997; Thijssen 2012, 461).

¹ This research was funded by NWO grant VI.Veni.191H.048.

Another example from the analytical vocabulary of my own discipline, International Relations, shows the extent to which the medieval/modern periodization is foundational across the social sciences. There has now been for a few years a widespread sentiment among International Relations scholars that the analytics yielded by the very name of the discipline—inter-national, or relations between nations (-states)—could not adequately account for current dynamics. Thus, many scholars have proclaimed the end of the nation-state (see e.g., Ohmae 1995) as new forms of identification, from religious groups to online communities, are said to have emerged that challenge the role of the nation as the fundamental form of political allegiance. And yet, we may ask, what types of historical narratives do these claims and analytics rely on? Scholars such as Jens Bartelson (2011) have shown how the development of this international conceptual approach that focused on the nation-state as the main mode of allegiance and on indivisible, unified sovereignty as its counterpart was never a matter of capturing actual historical dynamics. On the contrary, as is well-known, sovereignty was historically very much divisible and divided (see e.g., Keene 2002). The development of the analytics of the nation-state was rather a matter of theoretical fictions by which we came to only be able to see through a lens of sovereignty and political community as unified and indivisible. And as Davis (2008, esp. part 1) shows, the condition of possibility for this theoretical and later analytical grounding of sovereignty and of the single, indivisible political community is an act of periodization that places its opposite—feudalism and plural loyalty—as something of the (medieval) past.

Crucially, just like the ideal of sovereignty and single indivisible loyalty was never anything but an ideal, a political fiction later turned social science analytics, the same can be said of the notion of ‘the medieval’ as feudal and divided. And it is only once we understand this grounding of analytical vocabularies upon periodization that tells us that the medieval past had multiple loyalties, and the modern present an indivisible allegiance to the nation-state, that we can begin to understand the conceptual crisis caused by the self-evident presence of a variety of forms of community in contemporary politics, but also the appearance of analytical paradigms such as neomedievalism that see in this periodized medieval past the only heuristic resource available to understand the dynamics of contemporary networked politics (Cerny 1998; Friedrichs 2004; Kobrin 1999).² In a nutshell, the social science imaginary of ‘the medieval’ constrains not only our historical comprehension but also our ability to imagine politics differently than the nation-state, and thus understand our contemporary condition.

Ultimately, these are of course but two short snippets of a much larger phenomenon. And yet, they illustrate how time and again ‘the medieval’ pops up as an analytical concept—not as a historical analysis—in a variety of corners of social sciences. This ‘medieval,’ however, is not the medieval of medieval studies scholars and their historical studies. It is a singularized and idealized medieval, a conceptual shorthand or a name that mostly functions as an analytical other to whatever aspect of modernity is at hand—hence the crucial role for medieval studies scholars: for vis-a-vis an analytically-impooverished medieval, they provide fundamentally different interpretative schemes, which pluralize our understanding of the Middle Ages in ways that not only challenge the narratives at the core of our concepts but also can provide viable ways forward beyond the medieval/modern analytical stopgap. And it is crucial that medieval studies scholars engage in these conversations with scholars from other

² For a fuller development of these arguments, see Costa Lopez 2021 and 2023.

humanities and social sciences, for they can not only help us realize the limits of our own concepts—concepts which are at the basis of both academic work and much policy advice and social intervention—but also help us craft better ones with which we can understand and thus tackle contemporary challenges.

Contemporary (Violent) Medievalisms

Unfortunately, the relevance of the medieval for international politics has become clearer due to the prominence of circulating medieval imagery and ideas in contemporary political contexts, particularly, but certainly not exclusively, among current far-right and/or violent groups. Thus, famously, George W. Bush used crusading metaphors in the context of the war on terror (Holsinger 2007); supporters of far-right former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro have repeatedly invoked the motto *Deus Vult* during election campaigns (Pachá 2019); a number of mass shooters in recent years have sought to frame themselves as heirs to the Knights Templars (Millar and Costa Lopez 2021); or, most recently, some supporters of the English football team showed up to the World Cup in Qatar dressed broadly as crusaders (Smith 2022). Scholars of medieval studies have a prominent role to play in these contexts where the medieval gets mobilized with what one author has termed an “overtly blatant disregard for historical veracity” (Holsinger 2016, 165).

And yet, this is not to say the role of medieval studies scholars is one of mere fact-checkers, simply correcting the mistakes and inaccuracies in non-academic mobilizations of the Middle Ages. Far from it—it would be wrong to understand these as epiphenomenal (mis)uses of the period. On the contrary, these circulating medievalisms are essential for the perpetuation of current political dynamics. Although each use fulfills different roles, these mobilizations are imbricated in the construction of identities, political narratives, and notions of community that rely on a specific, essentialized ‘medieval.’

Let me expand on some of the examples above to illustrate this point. Many of these uses above either explicitly referenced the crusades or crusade-related topics such as the Knights Templars or the motto *Deus Vult*. In doing so, these mentions do not function as mere, innocent historical parallels, but rather serve to put forward an exclusionary and in many cases racist view of a transhistorical Christianity as a moral community that needs to be valued and protected (see Millar and Costa Lopez 2021). Thus, at first level, the use of ‘crusade’ in a post-9/11 context of wars in the Middle East serves to reframe these wars through a religious lens of Christianity against Islam (see Holsinger 2007). The historical claims in some of these uses, however, circulate socially as meaning much more than this. In the context of the apparently festive use of crusader costumes during the World Cup, which made international news as the fans wearing them were banned from entering the stadium, a Reddit thread makes clear that the wearing of crusading customs in Qatar is not only interpreted in political terms but also actively used to construct a hierarchy between communities that places Qatar as ‘backwards.’ Thus, for example, a user notes that

[t]he UK and Ireland was [sic] invaded by the Vikings, lots. I couldn’t give two fucks if Scandinavian Fans came here and dressed up as Odin himself. Qatar is way too

sensitive but then we already knew that. Time to join the 21st-century guys. (User A 2022)³

The political significance of these costumes thus becomes clear: not only are the UK and Ireland projected as entities back in time in a way that makes them susceptible of being invaded by the Vikings, but Qatar—whose land was never object of crusades—is equated with medieval Islamic polities and portrayed as backwards because of their taking offence.

This projection back in time of present-day communities is essential to many of these uses of the medieval. Thus, in the context of contemporary circulating uses of the Knights Templar, a UK-based organization with ties to violent right-wing groups claimed that

Western civilisation is entering a period of existential crisis. A convergence of external and internal catastrophes is leading inexorably to a time when the survival of Christendom will only be secured by dedicated Christians in the teeth of demonic evil. (KTOI in Millar and Costa Lopez 2021, 5)

Using this as a justification for the existence of modern-day Knights Templar, in this quote we find a politics of community that does not project modern-day identities back in time, but rather imagines medieval ones and extends them to the present. And key within the exclusionary politics that ensue is the imagination of the Middle Ages as a white and exclusionary Christian community, externally threatened, and internally betrayed and thus in need of protection. This idea is also apparent in the uses of a crusade by Bolsonaro supporters. Indeed, as Paulo Pachá has shown, by invoking a Christian Brazil, firmly anchored in ‘Western Civilization,’ the Brazilian far-right “erases the importance of indigenous and African peoples in the history of Brazil and ignores their social, cultural, and economic contributions,” thus effectively excluding them from the present-day political community (2019). And this political relevance goes beyond general discourse and electoral politics. As Katharine Millar and I have argued (2021), some uses of the Knights Templar along with a conspiratorial imaginary help to authorize a violent, hyper-agential mode of action that justifies violence in defense of this moral community.

Ultimately, thus, many of the current uses of the medieval in political discourse effectively reduce ‘the Middle Ages’ to a specific image of medieval Europe as Christian, pristinely white and isolated from (and thus uninfluenced by) the rest of the world. Doing so forms the basis for a number of transhistorical narratives that have political effects today and can function to enable distinct forms of violence. Medieval studies, broadly understood, stands at the center of the possibility of having a different imaginary of the Middle Ages and with it a different politics of the medieval. The work being done by a variety of different scholars and traditions to counter the image of a white Middle Ages (Krebs 2021; Heng 2018), to highlight the myriad connections that were integral to medieval politics (Holmes and Standen 2018; Moore 2016), and ultimately to challenge the association between ‘medieval’ and a specific geography of Western Europe is crucial in order to challenge the exclusionary politics of these contemporary far-right medievalisms. This means first of all that the ability to conduct this research is something we as a society should cherish and encourage because being surprised and challenged in our social preconceptions is fundamental in order to disrupt the power structures that

³ In keeping with research ethics, I have anonymized all users of social media.

cause the suffering of many by pretending they are normal and have always been so. Second, it also means that medieval studies scholars should play—and in many cases already are playing—a central role in the active dissemination and engagement with their work—not only by actively and publicly challenging these far-right narratives that perpetuate forms of domination and violence but also by providing new sources for our imagination through teaching, the building of publicly available resources and interactions with the broader public.

Public Histories

In a sharp observation about contemporary historical practices, historian Enzo Traverso has drawn attention to a “democratization of writing practices and, especially, of the writing of oneself.” Part of a long-term analysis about the role of history in society, he points to how “the end of the monopoly of the written by an intellectual elite—the XIX century was the age of the fight against analphabetism, the XX century, that of the spread of reading; now we have entered that of the appropriation of writing by those who up until now had been excluded from it —has led to ordinary men and women telling their lives” (2020, 12). Indeed, although one can easily inscribe the circulation of a variety of exclusionary and/or violent medieval imagery in long-standing political dynamics whereby medievalisms were integral to the legitimation of power, Traverso’s sharp observation disabuses us of the temptation to reduce the current situation to the well-known patterns of circulation of (semi-official) medieval historiography in the legitimation of nations, states, and other groups (see e.g., Geary 2002 or Geary and Klaniczay 2013).

To a certain extent, the observation resonates with a wealth of literature in both the social sciences and medieval studies that has explored the role of new technologies, and particularly social media, in altering traditional flows of information and identity categories. The argument is indeed not new: new communication technologies have fundamentally transformed the production and circulation of information, and with it political dynamics, to an extent which forces us to rethink some of our fundamental categories of analysis (Castells 1996). In the case of medievalisms, scholars such as Andrew B. R. Elliott have pointed out a “modern, tapas-style history, [in which] facts from the past can be selected at will and loosely corralled into almost anything we wish them to be” (2017, 9).

And yet, as knowledge producers in the humanities and social sciences, we would be remiss if we dismissed these everyday histories as mere fictions, as irreflexive reproductions of received knowledge, or as being unconcerned with the methods and possibilities of creating knowledge about the past. On the contrary, historical methods, the status of sources and the possibility of historical interpretation have entered the public domain of (political) discussion. And in this conversation, scholars of medieval studies have a crucial role to play not just as experts in the period, but most importantly as educators in a historical sensibility that contributes to the quality and, indeed, the possibility of public debate.

An example here from a very different, non-anglophone context may serve to illustrate this point (and to draw attention to the geographical spread and circulation of these dynamics). On 4 September 2022, a Twitter user, who identifies as having graduated with a History MA, posted that

[r]eading “España”, “Espanna”, “Hispania” or “España” in a medieval or premodern document does not prove the existence of Spain as a nation since medieval times. It is

precisely the work of the historian to understand the semantics of a concept in its production context. (User B 2022)

In Spain, the historiographical status of the so-called Reconquista, and the political consequences of this historiography, have once again entered public debate after being mobilized by the far-right party VOX (Esteve-Del-Valle and Costa López 2023). As a narrative of 800 years of political and inter-faith relations in the Iberian Peninsula, the Reconquista has a long (and infamous) history of being mobilized in nationalist and exclusionary politics, for it not only creates a mythical Spain that has existed since before the eighth century, but also attributes to it a fundamental Christian character (de Ayala Martínez 2020; García Sanjuán 2020). This political use, however, is only one part of what constitutes an active historiographic debate about medieval Iberia, intersecting with some of the themes we have mentioned above (see e.g., Soifer 2009).

And yet, although with clear implications in terms of politics of community, the tweet above couches the debate in terms of methodology and approaches to historical writing. The online debate that ensued in the reactions and circulation of this tweet shows why we cannot be content with upholding the binary where ‘proper’ history is written by historians and everything else is ‘bad history.’ On the contrary, what it takes to write history in the first place is now subjected to public scrutiny and debate. Thus, one user asks, just as if in the middle of a historiography class, “why do we need to accept the term nation to that [sic] used in the 19th century [sic]? Wouldn’t it be more reasonable to assimilate the concept to each epoch, rather than each epoch to the concept?” (User C 2022). A number of the comments go in a similar direction. Some even explicitly mobilize some primary sources in support of their argument. A user pastes the cover of a 1600 edition of the sixth-century Visigothic *Liber Iudiciorum* with the explanation that “[a] single kingdom from Lucus augusti until Barcino, a single law from Toletun to Bracara augusta and a single religion from Hispalis to Caesar augusta [sic], it is the most similar to [corrected] a modern state in the 6th century and it was called Hispania. Geographical reference, he says...” (User D 2022). And yet, how to interpret this is not clear to another user, who asks, “[s]ince when is family property considered a Nation? I don’t understand the point of the debate” (User E 2022), to which someone else replies that “[s]ince that family property is a Nation and a political entity as can be deduced from the word regum” (User F 2022). Importantly, the political relevance of the narratives that ensue from the different methodological choices also enters the debate, and not just in reference to the far-right mobilizations of the Reconquista narrative. Thus, a user wants the debate surrounding the adequate use of the concept of nation in historiography brought to bear as well on other matters of contemporary relevance, such as secessionist movements in Spain: “I agree with some nuances, but this applies also to when secessionist movements want to bring back their nation to medieval times” (User G 2022). And another user questions the line between ideology and professionalism in the writing of history: “Are you seriously denying the existence of the Spanish Empire and by entailment the Spanish nation as its seed? Or do you want to erase part of our History because you don’t like it ideologically? Do you think that’s professional?” (User H 2022).

This is of course just a single, online debate. And yet it tells us something important about the role of medieval studies in contemporary society. At first level, it reminds us that as experts in both the period and in the writing of history, medieval studies scholars have a crucial role to play in contributing to the public debate about the writing of (medieval) history. This involves actively

engaging in these debates, not just from the authoritative position afforded by expertise, but also from an ethics of engagement and dialogue that takes seriously the ability and desire of the public to partake in history writing. More broadly, and to conclude my reflections in this essay, this also tells us something else: it tells us that the relevance of medieval studies relies firmly on the social embeddedness and interactions of these scholars—on interactions with each other in debating, pluralizing, and deepening our knowledge and analytical categories for the period; on interdisciplinary interactions with other scholars in order to translate that knowledge to other disciplines and hopefully also incorporate their insights and approaches; and on interactions beyond the scholarly world in order to make their knowledge and knowledge production procedures part of public debate.

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<https://twitter.com/DaniCGlez1/status/1566410422542106624?s=20&t=j8t2WDXm1Ma71WnFouUnxQ> and subsequent interactions.