MEDIEVAL IMAGERY IN TODAY'S POLITICS

Daniel Wollenberg

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Introduction

The Past Awakening

In the middle of the afternoon on May 21, 2013, a 78 year-old historian walked up to the altar in the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, pulled out a pistol, and shot himself in the mouth. Dominique Venner, a white-nationalist extremist whose writings range from eleven volumes on the history of firearms to an apologia for the Vichy regime to a survey of the traditions of "Europeans" over the last 30,000 years, meant for his very public suicide to be a symbolic protestation against the destruction of racial, national, and cultural identity. In a suicide note left on the Notre Dame altar, Venner denounced the unmooring of the "anchors of our identity" and hoped for a future rebirth of ancestral French and European values. The goal of his final act was to kindle the race consciousness of his fellow Frenchmen and Europeans, so that like him, they might see with clear eyes that a cathedral like Notre-Dame was built by "the genius of my ancestors" and perceive a communal European memory stretching back to Homer. For five decades, Venner had argued for the paramount importance of a white heritage and ancestry that give people's lives shape and meaning. On the day of his suicide, Marine Le Pen, the nationalist leader of the French far-right political party *Front National*, tweeted, "All our respect to Dominique Venner, whose last gesture … had

been to try to wake the people of France."[1] Venner's suicide, meant as an alarm for the sleeping race-blind, seems primarily to have shaken those who were already awake.

Among the "awoken"—in this case, the far and extreme right in North America and Western Europe—the intense and pervasive belief that communities of place, people, and nation have been seriously eroded in the last few decades has caused a retreat back into identity. In Europe over the last decade, increasing immigration from the Middle East and Africa, combined with nearly a dozen major terrorist attacks between 2010 and 2017, have bolstered a populist right that often whispers—and sometimes openly and vehemently advocates—xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric. With the rise of ethnic nationalism has come a heightened attention to defining authentic Americanness and Frenchness and Europeanness and, in turn, whiteness. At the core of that ethnic nationalism is the association of modernity with liberalism, tolerance, individualism, and multiculturalism; and of the premodern—the medieval—with solidarity, stability, law and order, cultural advance, and security.

In the United States, the American presidential election of 2016 revealed a serious crisis of white identity. What was once extremist or far-right thought now is discussed openly in mainstream venues and is alluded to, in however sugarcoated a way, in some of Donald Trump's, and his advisors', own discourse. That discourse at times draws on the medieval past, whether to paint enemies as primitive savages (which Trump himself often does) or to give weight to claims for the longevity and legitimacy of a unified white culture that has been battling for its survival for centuries (as his former chief strategist Steve Bannon has done). "If you look back at the long history of the Judeo-Christian West struggle against Islam," Bannon said in an interview at the Vatican in 2014, "I believe that

our forefathers kept their stance, and I think they did the right thing. I think they kept it out of the world, whether it was at Vienna, or Tours, or other places … it bequeathed to us the great institution that is the church of the West."[2] This interview posits a permanent clash of civilizations between the Christian West and the Islamic East. "Our forefathers" are those who fought against Islamic forces at the Battle of Tours in 732 and against the Turks at the Siege of Vienna in 1529, digging in their heels and standing up to defend European values. Bannon finished the interview with dire warnings about the "Judeo-Christian" battle with Islam and more praise for "our forefathers" who "bequeath[ed] to us a church and a civilization that really is the flower of mankind." The implication is that the West's strongest institutions and values, rooted in the Middle Ages, are under assault today as they were in the medieval past. This is white identity under siege. What was once boilerplate fodder for extremist white nationalists has become part of mainstream discourse.

Two opposing views of the medieval in political rhetoric—as the diabolical primitive and as the bedrock of modern identity—are studied here. The primary aim of this short book is not to set the record straight on the medieval. A medievalist could spend a whole career correcting common falsehoods about the Middle Ages and still not make much progress convincing anybody of the textures of an "authentic" or "real" Middle Ages, as opposed to the fabricated Middle Ages concocted so often by political rhetoric or in popular culture. This is because in many ways the medieval is a modern chimera. The medieval was constructed when post-Renaissance modernity moulded and solidified it into a mirror and contrast of what the modern was not.

While each of the simplifications and misrepresentations and misreadings of the Middle Ages, from dark

medievalism to neo-feudalism to an organic and homogenous white Middle Ages, clearly deserve their own full rebuttal, this short book is not quite the place where that work can be done. The primary aim of this book is, more simply, to introduce how and why the premodern past is manipulated and deployed as a means to certain political ends today. The first chapter introduces the medieval as an inherently politically charged concept in contemporary political discourse and examines dark medievalism in particular. The second chapter then turns to the far and extreme right's association of white identity with the Middle Ages at the more radical ends of political discourse. The third chapter examines Traditionalist Conservatism in the US and Europe, showing how the far- and extreme-right's embrace of medieval cultural heritage has been central to certain strands of relatively mainstream conservative thought for decades, if not longer. The fourth chapter turns its attention to political medievalism on the left (though not exclusively the left) and in the academy by considering the concept of "neo-feudalism" and revisiting the New Medievalism of International Relations theory. At the end of the book, there is a Further Reading section that offers selected texts beyond those cited in the endnotes.

A decade ago, Bruce Holsinger wrote a short but essential book on terrorism, politics, and medievalism called *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror*, which remains vital reading for anyone interested in how political discourse in the post-9/11 years consistently drew on the medieval to give shape to present uncertainties. Since that book's publication, the Middle Ages have become increasingly central to the politics of cultural and ethnic identity on the far right and to explanations by the left for increasing injustice and inequality. Holsinger suggested that in the toxic political environment that existed

after 9/11, medievalists' good intentions might be misconstrued as defending terrorists. That seems less likely today—although with the election of Donald Trump, perhaps I am being overly optimistic. Medievalists—scholars who specialize in the study of the Middle Ages—ought not to demand that the Middle Ages be completely excised from political discourse. If people with a public voice think the Middle Ages are important, then we should seize that opportunity to examine how the past can be exploited for political purchase.

Notes

[1] "Tout notre respect à Dominique Venner dont le dernier geste, éminemment politique, aura été de tenter de réveiller le peuple de France. MLP," Marine Le Pen, Twitter post, May 21, 2013, 12:14 p.m., https://twitter.com/mlp_officiel/status/336877763183140864 (my translation).

[2] J. Lester Feder, "This Is how Steve Bannon Sees the Entire World," *Buzzfeed*, November 15, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/this-is-how-steve-bannon-sees-the-entire-world?utm_term=.hllqE9vvv#.kug78KJJJ (accessed December 1, 2016).