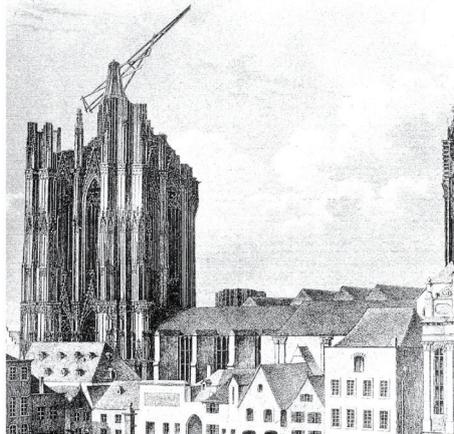


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*Recensão a **Medievalism, Politics  
and Mass Media.***

*Appropriating the Middle Ages  
in the Twenty-first Century,*

**de Andrew B.R. Elliott**

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**Riccardo Facchini**

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**Andrew B.R. Elliott**  
*Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media.*  
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The study of the exploitation of medieval tropes in contemporary political debate is a quite recent field of historical research. However, we can already find a significant amount of studies on this topic, such as the works of Bruce Holsinger (2007)<sup>1</sup>, Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri (2011)<sup>2</sup>, Daniel Wollenberg (2014)<sup>3</sup> and Louise d’Arcens and Andrew Lynch (2014).<sup>4</sup> These scholars have begun to analyse the cultural phenomenon of so-called ‘political medievalism’.

Even if studies on medievalism – which we consider the scholarly investigation of the post-medieval reception of the medieval in contemporary culture – are flourishing in the British and American academic context, they rarely deal with the political reception of the Middle Ages, preferring, for example, the analysis of medievalism as a

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1 Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007).

2 Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, *Medioevo Militante. La politica di oggi alle prese con barbari e crociati* (Torino: Einaudi, 2011).

3 Daniel Wollenberg, “The New Knighthood: Terrorism and the Medieval,” *Postmedieval: a Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 5 (2014): 21-33.

4 Louise d’Arcens Arcens, Andrew Lynch, *International Medievalism and Popular Culture* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2014).

process of representation,<sup>5</sup> or of the uses of medieval imagery in popular culture, such as films and TV series.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, even in the field of political medievalism nobody, until now, had analysed this issue in the light of communication theories. This gap has been successfully filled by Andrew B. R. Elliott, Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Lincoln, with *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media*.

Elliott's innovative approach is evident since the first pages. The author points out that the process which leads the Middle Ages to be «used throughout political discussion by the modern media» is divided into three phases: «historical expropriation, intercultural retransmission and ideological modification» (p. 6). This scheme is borrowed from communication theories and it can be applied to all the complex political phenomena analysed in the book. In fact, the study of 21<sup>st</sup> century political medievalism can no longer ignore what Elliott defines – using a term borrowed from Micheal Billig<sup>7</sup> – as «banal medievalism», which is nowadays constantly spread around the world by a «chaotically demotic mass media network» (p. 7).

After a brief but fundamental introduction on the historical construction of the idea of Middle Ages from the Renaissance to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (pp. 25-32), Elliott focuses on what the scholarly community now means by 'medievalism', 'neo-medievalism' or 'medievalisms' (pp. 33-37), clarifying that he has «no intention (...) of adding to the growing and confusing lexicon of terms», and describing the phenomenon «simply as medievalism *per se*» (p. 36).

5 Marcus Bull, *Thinking Medieval: an introduction to the study of the Middle Ages* (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005); Angela Jane Weisl, *The persistence of Medievalism: narrative adventures in contemporary culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003); Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: the Middle Ages in modern England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

6 Germana Gandino, «Il Medioevo rappresentato: il cinema, in *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*,» in *Arti e storia nel Medioevo*, ed. Enrico Castelnuovo, IV (Torino: Einaudi, 2004), 737-55; Nickolas Haydock, *Movie Medievalism: the imaginary Middle Ages* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008); Andrew Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages: the methods of cinema and history in portraying the Medieval world* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

7 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, Sage, 1995).

Almost all of Elliott's methodological approach can be found in the following few pages. According to the author, when we analyse any aspect of medievalism, we have to remember that what we are studying «is a question of function, not of accuracy» (p. 37). In fact, there should be no need to verify the historical accuracy of a cultural appropriation of the Middle Ages, because «the use of the term 'medieval' (...) with its imprecision and variety of meanings, maps a range of semantic fields simultaneously, which seek to make a connection not with the historical Middle Ages but, rather, with a collectively held idea about them» (p. 40). So, the scholars of medievalism should investigate this 'collective idea', recognising that the way in which it is «generated in modern mass media» is «not an issue of historical inquiry but one of communication theory» (p. 42).

After investigating the ways in which 'medieval' keywords have been recently used in Social Media – which leads the author to declare that «the Middle Ages are prevalent across the mass media» (p. 47) – Elliott focuses his attention on the perception of medieval categories in contemporary culture. In this case, the Middle Ages are still considered as being in total opposition to a common and shared idea of progress. Chapter 3 is probably the heart of Elliott's work: the author points out that «calling something 'medieval' means that even though the benefits of modernity lie open to them, the perpetrators have deliberately and perversely opted for the medieval over the modern» (p. 66). This form of idolatry, this 'myth of progress' plays a key role in the political and mediatic use of the Middle Ages, and it functions in the «rhetorical strategy» that wants to locate us, people of the West, «as the endpoint in an ineluctable march of progress» (p. 77).

Through some extreme examples the author then analyses the different ways in which the Middle ages have been used, exploited and perceived by the media during, at least, the last two decades. These examples consist of the uses of medieval tropes during the George W. Bush administration (pp. 77-105), in the idea of "Holy War" in al Qaeda's propaganda (pp. 106-131), in the tragic massacre carried out by Anders Breivik in 2011 and his connection with some neo-Templarist

movements (132-154), in the idea of Crusade in the English far-right parties (pp. 155- 182) and in the exploitation of the Medieval in the propaganda of the Islamic State (pp. 183-204).

Elliott notices that «the months and years following 9/11 and leading up to the Iraq invasion saw a relentless ramping up of the Bush administration’s medievalism» (p. 83). Following the aforementioned work of Holsinger, the author retraces the several ways in which the former US President and his staff used medieval categories to justify the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. However, Elliott’s approach is quite new, since he reads the phenomenon in the light of communication theories. For example, while analysing «Bush’s neomedievalist worldview», which saw the Crusades «as a logical response to an inevitable clash of civilisations» (p. 94), Elliott points out that it is only when some neo-medieval terms reach «a certainly critical mass, *and only* when that message connects with a preconception already held by that audience, that the banal medievalism functions at its most efficient. Mass communication theorists term this specific effect ‘resonance’» (91).

Furthermore, the analysis of a statement by Bin Laden suggests that his organisation «not only embraced Bush’s medievalism but even contributed new medievalisms of their own»; in fact, «the use of this double medievalism was later harnessed by al Qaeda to suggest an untainted purity of Islamic tradition with which al Qaeda – and later Islamic State – could readily associate themselves» (109). Bush’s medievalism, which was focused on the dichotomy West/Progress versus Islam/Medieval, gave the terrorists more than a reason to consider themselves different from Western civilization. As Elliott recalls, «rather than trying to fight back and demonstrate their modernity, al Qaeda’s acceptance of their status as a medieval entity allowed them to highlight the failures of modernity and the decadence of secular government, and moreover, allowed the crusades to emerge as a powerful metaphor for Western invasion» (p. 111). Bin Laden, even before the Bush administration started to use publicly words like ‘Crusade’ in its propaganda, had no intention of establishing a difference between the medieval crusaders and the Western people or the American troops. In

fact, «by insisting on a division of the world into a modern west and a medieval east, al Qaeda's jihadist movement was able to transform the banal medievalisms of Bush's coalition from slurs and insults into confirmation to his followers and would-be recruits that the world was facing not a new threat but a continuation of the historically rooted threat from the same old crusades and crusaders» (130).

If Bush and Bin Laden's medievalisms could be easily compared and linked together, the use of medieval imagery by Anders Behring Breivik has to be considered on its own. Anders Breivik, who killed 69 people during the Utoya (Norway) massacre on July 22, 2011, justified his acts by claiming to descend from the Knights Templar. According to Elliott, Breivik's «various medievalisms», therefore, sought to frame «his planned attacks as a justified continuation of an anti-jihadist struggle in the modern world, placing himself (as a self-titled Templar Knight) as part of a broader struggle against a perceived Islamic threat» (p. 141). In Breivik's mind, crusades, Templars, jihad and other medieval tropes, all function to exaggerate the alleged clash of civilisation between the West and Islam, offering him what Elliott calls a «parallel fantasy world of shared heritage, a myth of racial purity and a false sense of national identity (p. 141).

Chapter 7 addresses the English Defense League (EDL) – a far-right protest movement which focuses on opposition to an alleged spread of Islamism in the United Kingdom – and the counter-jihadist blogosphere led by the blogger known online as 'Richard The Lionhearted'. First, the author points out the role that these realities played in the 'education' of Breivik since, in his view, the EDL «represents part of the same counterjihad movement to which he desperately sought to belong, leading him to defend the EDL as a patriotic organisation of 'knights' devoted to fighting jihadists and so-called cultural Marxists» (p. 155). Secondly, Elliott investigates the spread of counter-jihadist ideas on the internet, both analysing the so-called «meme culture» (p. 165) and the fact that the websites and the blog «rely on the inherent 'spreadability' of banal medievalism online to popularise racism through memes disguised as historical tradition and participatory patriotism» (p.

166). The ‘participatory patriotism’ is one of the most original ideas in Elliott’s work, which defines it as «a means of rewriting the past used by counterjihad and far-right groups to side-step accusations of racism by adopting a celebratory mode of medievalism». (p. 178).

In the last part of his book, Elliott investigates the medievalism of the Islamic State. In this case, it is quite natural to make a comparison with the aforementioned case of al Qaeda, with which the IS’s medievalism has several points of contact, such as the way they «took on the mantle of ‘medieval’, and even wore it as a badge of pride and identity» (p. 184). However, in Elliott’s opinion, «although IS are like al Qaeda in their acceptance and use of medievalism, for IS their medievalisms are not entirely banal but motivated by a sense of deep-rooted nostalgia for a past which enjoyed a sense of autonomy» (pp. 184-185).

In conclusion, Elliott’s work represents a fundamental step in the historiographical evolution of studies on medievalism, and on political medievalism in particular. He has been able to offer to the academic community a new point of view on the topic, which completes, without replacing them, the works of other scholars, who are, most of all, ‘pure’ medievalists. Elliott, instead, knows that this field of research deserves several different perspectives, offering us the approach of a scholar of communication studies in order to better understand the role played by medieval imagery in contemporary political debate. This proves the need for a true, and not just apparent, interdisciplinary approach to the study of medievalism, a cultural phenomenon still partially ignored by the academic community.

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