



Recensão a *The Militant Middle  
Ages. Contemporary Politics  
between New Barbarians and Mod-  
ern Crusaders*,  
de Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri

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**Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri**  
*The Militant Middle Ages.*  
*Contemporary Politics between New*  
*Barbarians and Modern Crusaders*  
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Pedro Martins\*

In recent years, the phenomenon that several scholars have defined as “medievalism”<sup>1</sup> has received considerable academic attention. Studies focusing on its conceptualization, on the epistemological issues raised by the sometimes termed “medievalism studies” and on the “uses of the medieval past” in various spheres, namely the political one<sup>2</sup>, have demonstrated the importance of this phenomenon in current times.

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1 On the various definitions of medievalism, see Leslie J. Workman, preface to *Studies in Medievalism* 1, n.º 1 (1979): 1; Leslie J. Workman, “Medievalism”, in *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*, edited by Norris J. Lacy (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1986), 378; *Studies in Medievalism* 17: *Defining Medievalism* (2009); and Ulrich Müller, “Medievalism”, in *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms, Methods, Trends, Volume 1*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 850-65.

2 To mention only a few: Patrick Geary and Gábor Klaniczay, eds., *Manufacturing Middle Ages. Entangled History of Medievalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013); Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz, eds., *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014); David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015); Louise D’Arcens, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (Cambridge: University Press, 2016); Andrew B. R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media. Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-first Century* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017) (reviewed by Riccardo Facchini in *Práticas da História: Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past* 4 (2017): 245-250. [http://www.praticasdahistoria.pt/issues/2017/4/10\\_PDH\\_04Facchini.pdf](http://www.praticasdahistoria.pt/issues/2017/4/10_PDH_04Facchini.pdf) [accessed 28 May 2020]); K. Patrick Fazioli, *The Mirror of the Medieval: An Anthropology of the Western Historical Imagination* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Richard Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Kalamazoo: ARC Humanities Press, 2017); Daniel Wollenberg, *Medieval Imagery in Today’s Politics* (Leeds: Arc Humanities, 2018).

Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri's book, originally published in Italian in 2011<sup>3</sup> and later translated to Spanish in 2015<sup>4</sup>, is part of this trend. This English translation, published by Brill, offers a wider audience the opportunity to reflect on the author's thoughts on this phenomenon, here examined primarily through the lens of contemporary politics.

One of the greatest merits of Carpegna Falconieri's book is precisely to demonstrate, if there were still doubts in the scholarly milieu, that medievalism is a complex phenomenon with serious political implications. As he states in the introduction, "Medievalism is not just an innocuous *divertissement*, a more or less fleeting fashion, like the superficial symptom of an escape fantasy, or magic or fairy tales. On the contrary, it establishes solid ties to public action". The book delves into the possibility of the Middle Ages becoming a "key to reading contemporary society and the direction in which it is headed"<sup>5</sup>. Though it might be said that the author offers a mere glimpse of this ambitious prospect, his work never ceases to prove that medievalist imagery and allusions did not "die" with the end of the Second World War – as authors such as Stefan Goebel have proposed<sup>6</sup> – but remain a recurring force in contemporary politics. The book's epilogue reinforces this assumption, with references to political developments that had still not taken place at the time of the Italian and Spanish editions, such as the proclamation of the caliphate by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in 2014, the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election in 2016, the Catalan independence referendum in 2017 and the presence of the *Lega* (formerly known as *Lega Nord*) in the Italian government from 2018 to 2019.

Carpegna Falconieri's work is divided into twelve chapters. Though only chapters 6 and 7 specifically address left- and right-wing interpre-

3 Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, *Medioevo militante. La política di oggi alle prese con barbari e crociati* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 2011).

4 Tommaso di Carpegna Falconieri, *El presente medieval. Bárbaros y cruzados en la política actual* (Barcelona: Icaria, 2015).

5 Carpegna Falconieri, *The Militant Middle Ages*, 1-2.

6 Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory. War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 13.

tations, this division permeates the whole book, reminding us of the multiplicity of ideological interpretations of the Middle Ages. The first three chapters are more introductory in nature, addressing the history of medievalism, its current relevance and the use of medieval tropes in contemporary politics.

Chapters 1 and 2 essentially examine the use of medieval tropes in a “negative” way, or what David Matthews has appropriately called the “*gothic*” or “*grotesque* Middle Ages”<sup>7</sup>. In chapter 1, for instance, the author makes an insightful critique of the so-called political theory of “neo-medievalism”, through which the contemporary world is interpreted in terms analogous to those commonly used for the medieval period. Picking up on the several “crises” of the idea of progress, namely the one that followed the 1970s economic crisis, Carpegna Falconieri argues that the Middle Ages once again became an important interpretative category in the post-modern age. The examples range from late-20<sup>th</sup> century millenarist movements –which the author considers to be more pervasive than the fears of the year 1000– and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 – often described in apocalyptic terms – to the “clash of civilizations” theory – whose similarity with the context of the crusades is stressed – and the so-called “neo-medieval” federalism promoted by parties such as the *Lega Nord*. However, Carpegna Falconieri alerts to the theoretical problems of “neo-medievalism”, namely the rigid framework through which it examines the Middle Ages and its overlooking of the continuities between this epoch and the early modern period. Chapter 2 addresses the use of medieval themes in recent world politics. Special attention is paid to the use of orientalist stereotypes to characterize the relations between the so-called Western world and the Arab world since the attacks of 9/11. However, as the author stresses, this orientalizing/medievalizing of the enemy is not one-sided but mutual, as the rhetoric employed by Islamic fundamentalists equates their Western foes with medieval “crusaders”.

In chapter 3, Carpegna Falconieri presents a brief but perceptive history of the “positive” – or, in Matthews’s term, the “*romantic*” – uses

<sup>7</sup> Matthews, *Medievalism*, 15.

of the Middle Ages since the eighteenth century. Though the author's claim that "medievalism as a cultural movement was born in England around 1760"<sup>8</sup> might be too bold for some scholars, there is today no doubt that pre-Romantic and Romantic authors played a key role in the reassessment and popularization of the medieval. Carpegna Falconieri goes on to affirm that "someone with no philological training still has trouble today distinguishing [...] between the Middle Ages invented in the nineteenth century and the 'real', historically verifiable era"<sup>9</sup>. After explaining why the medieval period can be more appealing to politicians than Antiquity, the chapter concludes with a problematization of the relationship between medieval studies and (popular) medievalism – a subject that other scholars such as David Matthews have raised in the past few years.

The following chapters thematically continue the reflection on the positive uses of the Middle Ages. Chapter 4 picks up where the previous one left off, in stricter chronological order, examining the evolution of medievalism from the end of the nineteenth century to current times. Carpegna Falconieri seems to agree with Leslie J. Workman's claim that, with a few exceptions, the political usage of the Middle Ages declined from the end of the First World War to the 1970s<sup>10</sup>. This also echoes David Matthews's assumption that only at a certain point of the nineteenth century did medievalism achieve "something approaching cultural dominance in several European cultures at once", after which it became a "residual form"<sup>11</sup>. While Richard Utz has criticised this hypothesis<sup>12</sup>, it would have been interesting to see Carpegna Falconieri engage in this debate.

8 Carpegna Falconieri, *The Militant Middle Ages*, 52.

9 Carpegna Falconieri, *The Militant Middle Ages*, 57.

10 Leslie J. Workman, "Medievalism and Romanticism", *Poetica. An International Journal of Linguistic-Literary Studies* 39-40 (1994): 22.

11 Matthews, *Medievalism*, xi, 32.

12 Richard Utz, "Medievalism: A Critical History: A Response", *Práticas da História* 3 (2016): 155-161. [http://www.praticasdahistoria.pt/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/09\\_PDH\\_03-ReviewUtz.pdf](http://www.praticasdahistoria.pt/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/09_PDH_03-ReviewUtz.pdf) [accessed 4 June 2020]. See also David Matthews, "Putting on the Armour: A Response to Richard Utz", *Práticas da História* 4 (2017): 237-243. [http://www.praticasdahistoria.pt/issues/2017/4/09\\_PDH\\_04Matthews.pdf](http://www.praticasdahistoria.pt/issues/2017/4/09_PDH_04Matthews.pdf) [accessed 4 June 2020].

The author considers Germany to be one of the few exceptions to this decline of the political usage of the Middle Ages from the First World War to the 1970s. According to him, this a country in which “the Middle Ages continued to be presented as the nation’s primary distinctive and identifying element from the nineteenth century until the end of the Second World”<sup>13</sup>. Though this is undoubtedly true, the exceptionalism that he attributes to the German case is somewhat akin to the *Sonderweg* theory, criticized by historians such as David Blackbourn, Geoff Eley and Detlev Peukert<sup>14</sup>. In addition, as Carpegna Falconieri affirms in chapter 5, interwar authoritarian regimes such as Fascist Italy, despite their preference for other eras such as Classical Antiquity, not only did not ignore the Middle Ages but promoted the “recovery” or “reinvention” of civic traditions in medieval garments<sup>15</sup>. The book could have delved into this comparative perspective, as there are other interesting cases such as Francoist Spain or the Portuguese *Estado Novo*<sup>16</sup>.

One of the best interpretative qualities of Carpegna Falconieri’s work lies precisely in how he frames this medievalization of civic traditions as one of the elements in which medievalism is most present in today’s public sphere. Making an insightful use of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s concept of “invented tradition”, the author explains the reasons of this phenomenon, commonly found in medieval, or – as they are called in the US – Renaissance fairs and festivals. Regarding this type of events, the author calls attention to the persistence of Romantic medievalism, “which established a perfect equivalence between

13 Carpegna Falconieri, *The Militant Middle Ages*, 110.

14 David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: bourgeois society and politics in nineteenth-century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).

15 Carpegna Falconieri, *The Militant Middle Ages*, 81.

16 Pedro Ruiz Torres, “Les usages politiques de l’histoire en Espagne. Formes, limites et contradictions”, in *Les usages politiques du passé*, edited by François Hartog and Jacques Revel (Paris : Éditions de L’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2001), 140-41; Sérgio Campos Matos and David Mota Álvarez, “Portuguese and Spanish Historiographies: Distance and Proximity”, in *The Contested Nation. Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, edited by Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 344-46, 357-359; Pedro Alexandre Guerreiro Martins, “History, Nation and Politics: The Middle Ages in Modern Portugal (1890-1947)” (PhD dissertation, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2016).

the Middle Ages and affiliation with a specific community”<sup>17</sup>. Though the book mostly addresses the Italian case, a similar theoretical framework could be used in other national contexts in which this form of medievalism has become prevalent.

Chapters 6 and 7 specifically address left and right-wing uses of the medieval period. While Carpegna Falconieri explains clearly why appropriations of the Middle Ages on the right side of the political spectrum have been more widespread, he does not diminish the importance of medieval tropes on the Left. Building on the insights of previous scholars such as Leslie J. Workman or Umberto Eco, he describes the revival of medieval traditions since the 1960s by left-wing intellectuals and artists whose works left a profound impression on popular culture. However, the author also stresses that “social” or “progressive medievalism” has its roots in nineteenth-century British culture thanks to figures such as Augustus Pugin, Benjamin Disraeli, John Ruskin or William Morris. On both sides of the political spectrum, Carpegna Falconieri delineates the powerful depiction of the medieval period as a “place of antithesis” towards modernity<sup>18</sup>. Of particular interest is his interpretation of the Middle Ages as a form of post-modern myth that confers sense to a society that has largely lost its faith in the idea of progress or in the ability of science to explain everything. This idea of the medieval as a positive myth is developed in chapters 8 and 9. Here, *The Militant Middle Ages* covers two significant “medieval” revivals that have persisted until the present day and have had a profound impact on the political landscape of several countries: the “Nordic” and the “Celtic” ones. As in the previous two chapters, the author makes clear that, although often associated with far-right groups, these are in fact cultural movements rooted in age-old ideas which do not necessarily coincide with this part of the political sphere.

In Chapter 10, the book addresses the uses of the Middle Ages in Christian circles, more specifically in the Catholic world. The section

17 Carpegna Falconieri, *The Militant Middle Ages*, 83.

18 Carpegna Falconieri, *The Militant Middle Ages*, 105.

provides a comprehensive account of this subject, particularly focusing on how these uses echoed the everlasting debates on tradition and modernity. Carpegna Falconieri devotes some attention to the papacy of Benedict XVI, a pontiff commonly perceived as a supporter of Catholic traditionalism, and to the political implications of recent canonization processes of medieval figures.

The last two chapters cover the nationalist and Europeanist appropriations of the medieval past. In the first case, the author begins with the Yugoslavian politics of the late 1980s and 1990s and goes on to recent European separatist and nationalist movements whose legitimacy and goals point to medieval tropes. Carpegna Falconieri speaks of a “medievalizing neo-Romanticism”<sup>19</sup>, particularly in the cases of Serbia and the *Lega Nord*, and brings to light the substantial research that, over the last decades, historians have been conducting to dismantle these appropriations and prove the modern (as opposed to the medieval) origins of European national identities. In the final chapter, the book makes an interesting summary of the multiple ways the Middle Ages have been used to create a sense of European identity. The examples go from analogies with the Carolingian Empire to modern concerns with the heritagization of medieval “roads” (routes).

Given its comprehensive nature and ability to summarise a wide range of topics and chronologies, Tommaso Di Carpegna Falconieri’s *The Militant Middle Ages* proves to be one of the most important current works on the history of the modern and contemporary uses of the medieval period. Though the author’s final remark on the silence of recent separatist claims – namely those of the Brexiters, the Catalanian independentists and the Italian *Lega* – regarding the Middle Ages might be a little too premature, his book never ceases to demonstrate how this historical period is far from being a relic from the past. Because, in the words of Benedetto Croce, “every true history is contemporary history”<sup>20</sup>.

19 Carpegna Falconieri, *The Militant Middle Ages*, 190.

20 Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), 12.

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