

Review

The Mirror of the Medieval: an Anthropology of the Western Historical Imagination by K. Patrick Fazioli (Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities at Mercy College (NY)). New York/Oxford: Berghahn. 2017. ISBN 978-1-78533-544-0.

Fazioli's contribution to the theory of history is interdisciplinary; a deeper dialogue between historians and anthropologists would cast light on the nature of historical thinking, he argues. This 'manifesto' is applied specifically to the problem of the medieval, and the way in which Western modernity (both popularly and academically) has imagined it. The second chapter is a highly erudite and lucid exposition of this problem. Since the Renaissance, Fazioli argues, the medieval has been a mental space onto which the Western mind has projected its demons sometimes by disparagement (e.g. the idea of medieval Man as intolerant and irrational), less frequently by idealising it. As Fazioli ably shows, modern myths about the medieval thrived in parallel to the West's other great project: colonialism. The Other of its own medieval past was imagined as analogous to the spatial Other of non-European societies. Fazioli's reading is subtle and surprising: the 19th century tendency to see *only* a temporal difference between Europe and her colonies was in some respects more humane than recent theories premised on more fundamental differences e.g. the 'clash of civilizations' and post-colonial theory. He shows modern myths about the medieval, and thus the societies that produced them, to be both diverse and dynamic, thus avoiding a crass Occidentalism.

A self-reflective chapter 3 considers the relationship between medieval ethnographic writings and modern anthropology as an instance of the sort of imagined barrier between the two periods discussed previously. Fazioli examines anthropologists' reluctance to trace the origins of their discipline beyond the early modern period; dismissive of medieval ethnographic writings, they too contribute to the myth of medieval society as ignorant, fantastical, and intolerant. Fazioli, by contrast, follows S. Khanmohamadi and others in seeing some medieval ethnographers as worthy of modern anthropologists' respect.

The myths in question (e.g. *Medieval Society Was Profoundly Intolerant toward the Other*) are familiar; nonetheless, by expressing them crudely and anonymously, Fazioli here risks caricaturing the modern society that produced them. Other modern scholars with nuanced views of the medieval mind are mentioned in passing. He chooses, rhetorically, to treat them as exceptions.

Two ethnographers, Gerald of Wales and William of Rubruck, are discussed, essentially as examples of proto-anthropologists. But a clear selection bias is implicit in this choice of two famously sophisticated authors; it also serves Fazioli's rhetorical agenda that more fantastical ones are mentioned only in passing. More fundamentally, it is unclear how the question of anthropology's intellectual origins serves his wider thesis. He claims to reject 'the whiggish temptation to highlight only those...elements of medieval thought that foreshadow contemporary ideas', preferring to evaluate it 'on its own terms' (p. 59). Here, he seems to have sensed a danger in his argument without effectively countering it, for it is precisely their foreshadowing of anthropology's intellectual values ('sober and realistic', 'reliable and accurate') that makes Gerald and William praiseworthy in his eyes. Their early modern successors, by contrast, who replaced Christian anthropological categories with pseudo-scientific, racial ones, were apparently inferior. Indeed, medieval ethnographers deserve to be placed beside 'indigenous and postcolonial anthropologies'. But these assertions seem just to reinforce the medieval/modern and the Western/non-Western divides Fazioli criticises elsewhere. This chapter would surely have benefited if

the author really had read these texts on their 'own terms', or at least been more self-reflective in applying value judgements.

In a second part, chapters four and five promise a detailed case study of the Eastern Alps, historically a mixed region of Slavs and Germans where, since thenineteenth century, the past has been made to serve contemporary nationalist agendas. German intellectuals romanticised earlier eastwards expansions as a single, noble *Drang nach Osten* and, correspondingly, disparaged local Slavs as primitive. Over time, these tendencies became more pronounced until, under the Nazis, the historical presence of Slavs in that region was aggressively denied. Slovenian nationalists, by contrast, drew competing lessons from the same period, idealising the short-lived Slavic state of Carantania (658-743 A.D.) as a Golden Age of stability, prosperity and equality, before it fell victim to Frankish (i.e. German) aggression. As in chapter 2, various versions of these myths, the uses to which they were put, and their evolution over time are well explained. So too is the shakiness of the evidence underpinning them. These chapters will be of interest to scholars of nineteenth and twentieth century nationalism, partly because they deal with one of the less discussed regions of Europe, and partly because of the clear way in which they expose the close interdependence of mutually competing ethnic narratives. The simple stories on which these myths were founded also provide useful examples of the sort of 'Schematic Narrative Template' discussed in collective memory studies.¹

These chapters are the book's only detailed case study. But their exemplification of the general arguments outlined in the first two chapters feels inadequate. There, Fazioli argued that the middle ages were a uniquely important receptacle for the mental projections of modern Western society, primarily by disparagement, less commonly by idealisation. But according to this clear schema, the Eastern Alps surely constitute a less typical case since both ethnic myths essentially belong to the second, romanticised type. Of course, disparagement occurred, as shown by the 'colonial gaze' of the dominant Germans towards the 'primitive' Slavs. But the Slavs seem not to have been specifically 'medievalized' in this relationship. In this respect, they differed from, for example, the Malays under British rule (see p. 41), and more closely resembled in the Western mind indigeneous Americans and Australians. Similarly, the recent 'Venetic' myth of Slovenia's origins (see pp.103-4) is pre-classical not medieval. In other words, many pre-modern periods, not only the middle ages, have been disparaged and idealised for political purposes. And, in as much as Slovenians did this from the non-Western position accorded to them, we might also question how specifically 'Western' such idealisation is.

Chapter six offers an overview of the ethnogenesis debate of the last few decades, and follows other scholars in regarding it as sterile. Fazioli proposes a new notion of identity founded on 'communities of practice', such as that generated by craftsmen. In contrast to the unknowable subjectivities of ethnicity, such identities may be more concretely detectable through archaeology. Fazioli's example is coarse ware pottery in early medieval Slovenia, and he shows how the speed with which Roman styles and modes of production were superseded varied hugely by region, suggesting a more complex transition to the middle ages than simplistic ethnic models would suggest. These findings are interesting; nonetheless, the sense in which other identities are *alternative* to ethnicity requires careful reflection. It is crucial not to conflate the difficulties for us in studying such identities with the view that they were unimportant at the time. Identities can be highly complex, not just because an individual may identify him/herself in multiple ways (for example, as a Roman *and* a potter), but also because, as I have argued

¹ See Jim V. Wertsch, *Voices of Colletive Remembering*, (Cambridge, 2002).

elsewhere, societies can be internally divided on what importance they should accord to different identity criteria.²

Chapter 7 examines Christianisation in the Eastern Alps in an analogous way. There, archaeology reveals a gradual and complex transition. By reusing pagan sites, for example, Christianity both replaced and preserved older religious practices in a 'syncretic blending'. To scholars of late antiquity, such conclusions will be very familiar;³ what Fazioli usefully contributes is further corroboration from a lesser studied region of Europe. But, regrettably, rather than frame his findings within this already mature debate, Fazioli deploys his polemic against the straw men of triumphalist Christian narratives on the one hand and narrowly socio-political explanations on the other. His solution to those misperceptions – to reimagine time itself along Bergsonian and Deleuzian lines – seems like a crass *deus ex machina*, quite unnecessary for approaching the historical issues in question. It is hard to see what purpose this section serves except as a poetic injunction against overgeneralization and simplification.

Fazioli's conclusion lucidly recaps the book's contents before intriguingly applying psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory to the modern/medieval relationship. Now he returns to the opening questions from which the book has long since meandered, but the term 'anthropology' seems to have disappeared altogether. One cannot help thinking that his wide-ranging insights would have been better as a selection of self-standing essays with a loose but common orientation. The book's problems – its choice of straw men, casual use and abandonment of theoretical frameworks, and abrupt moves from the general to the specific – seem to stem from its pretension to present a unified thesis.

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November 17, 2017

² Peter Turner, 'Identity in Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*: an Unidentified Problem' *Cambrian Mediaeval Celtic Studies* 58 (Winter 2009), 29-48.

³ For example. Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990).