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Book Review

Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century. By Andrew B. R. Elliott. Boydell. 2017. x + 223pp. £30.00.

On 16 July 2018, controversial atheist, sceptic and biologist Richard Dawkins posed for a picture in front of Winchester Cathedral and used the backdrop to tweet a racist statement comparing the bells of ‘one of our great mediaeval cathedrals’ to the ‘aggressive-sounding’ Muslim adhan. As of this writing (7 August 2018), this tweet has garnered 16,915 ‘Likes’, 3,646 retweets and more than 10,000 comments (including one from the account ‘Racism WatchDog’, replying simply: ‘WOOF’).

I start this review with Twitter not simply for the populist appeal but for two reasons. Firstly, this is the context in which Andrew B. R. Elliott’s 2017 *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century* sits. Secondly, this demonstrates very soundly many of the principles of Elliott’s ideas: that the use of the medieval and medievalism through online mass media provides a platform through which many groups, particularly right-wing, white supremacists, racists, far-right and fascist outfits, present their ideas about Islam and Muslims that gain traction and large audiences, often through easily disseminated memes on closed loops. When the Middle Ages is emptied of historical meaning, ‘medieval’ is used without context to further the aims of an increasingly vocal far right and fascist contingency through the mass media. In this context, Elliott’s book moves from being very important to Very Important: mass-media medievalism has increased since the book went to press in 2016, seeing the ‘medieval’ become emptied and refilled with meaning divorced from history, rendering the past a place for appropriation.

Elliott works with what he calls ‘banal medievalism’, borrowing from Michael Billig’s ‘banal nationalism’. Banal medievalism is based in ‘not the past but an absence of that past’ (p. 19), a medieval specifically ‘dislocat[ed] from history’ which then has ‘no specific, identifiable sign to which it is pointing’ and so ‘does not require any specific skills to decode it’ (p. 23). Some of these uses feel more benign than others; for example, a data-gathering exercise of online banal medievalism from the week of 20–27 October 2012 includes examples such as a captured 600-pound-marlin ‘going medieval’ on a fishing vessel (p. 49). But even these examples, as Elliott’s banal medievalism stresses, do not seek to clarify the present from the past but instead use the medieval as an empty signifier. The reference to the term ‘medieval’ in banal medievalism refers to anything ‘not considered to be progressive and relentlessly forward-looking’ (p. 72). This is what underlies the issues in the interconnected case studies which constitute the bulk of the monograph.

These case studies focus primarily on ‘crusade/crusader’ analogies and their extensions. Two intertwined chapters examine George W. Bush’s and Osama bin Laden’s uses of the same medievalism to demonize the other. The former begins

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2 with Bush's ill-advised and off-script reference to the War on Terror as a 'crusade'
 3 and the Bush PR team's banal medievalism to create division between 'us' and
 4 'them', the 'medieval' and 'modern' East and West, and subsequent casting of the
 5 'Crusade as Liberation' (pp. 78–105), relying on a Comtean idea of positivism and
 6 'progress' from a medieval to a modern society, and echoing Elliott's definition of
 7 the banal medieval as seen as anti-progressive. Similarly, though, al Qaeda's [use
 8 of] precisely the same rhetorical division into "us" and "them" in the decade
 9 previous to 9/11 resulted in the subsequent post-9/11 use of Bush's 'crusade
 10 gaffe' to 'position [the West] as Crusaders and al Qaeda as brave defenders'
 11 (pp. 108–9). Banal medievalism plays an unquestioned role in Islamophobia and
 12 racism, and these linked case studies further demonstrate how history, stripped
 13 of information, becomes a channel for conflicting and opposing appropriation.

14 Two further case studies offer equally integral and intersecting studies. The
 15 first explores Anders Behring Breivik's manifesto and its insistence on a new
 16 Templar order, a medievalism produced in a still-continuing, online 'closed loop
 17 of banal medievalism' (p. 153). This language of banal medievalism is also
 18 shared by far-right groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) and
 19 others. Elliott's examination brings to the fore the more significantly damaging
 20 aspects of these online closed loops to far-right rhetoric. Calling them the
 21 'counterjihad filter bubble' (p. 173), Elliott demonstrates how these closed loops
 22 perpetuate confirmation bias as well as 'avoid[ing] encounters with contradictory
 23 material' (p. 171), all features which contribute to the shared political as well
 24 as medievalist language. The discussion of the banal medievalism of the EDL
 25 and its insistence on the 'medieval' Islam, highlighted in Tommy Robinson's
 26 2011 *Newsnight* interview with Jeremy Paxman (pp. 162–4), is placed in contrast,
 27 ironically, to groups such as the Front National, Stormfront, British National
 28 Party, Traditional Britain Group and the EDL itself making links to white, pan-
 29 European medieval origins as the basis of their approaches to white supremacy
 30 (pp. 176–181). This is particularly apt in not only demonstrating the danger
 31 of political medievalism in these contexts, but the absolute divorce of banal
 32 medievalism from historical content.

33 The political climate in which Elliott wrote this book is still current. A final
 34 chapter, including the book's conclusions, brings the monograph right up to its
 35 own submission date in 2016 in analysing IS, the Middle Ages and mass media,
 36 and this is ongoing. Elliott rightly points out that the use of the medieval past
 37 has never been dislocated from modern discourse but that the newness in the
 38 twenty-first century is in the targets: largely Muslim and Middle Eastern since
 39 the 'neomedievalism . . . "Clash of Civilisation" theory emerged in East/West
 40 relations' starting with the Bush Doctrine post-9/11 (p. 199). In this sense, Elliott
 41 poignantly notes, 'complex debates become transposed onto a simple dialectic
 42 between medievalism and modernism, and implicitly between neomedievalism
 43 and neoliberalism' (p. 199).

44 Elliott's work is thorough, excellently written and gives his readers, who
 45 should include students, medievalists, modernists, media experts, politicians
 46 and activists, a framework to understand the particular rhetoric of political
 47 medievalism in the ever-changing landscape of mass media. It is difficult to
 48 understate how crucial Elliott's monograph is on both the academic and the
 public levels.

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