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Studying the Middle Ages: Historical Food for Thought in the Present Day

Abstract: Why study the Middle Ages? The answers this question yields concern more than simply medievalists: they generate reflections regarding the usefulness of science or intellectual engagement in any given society. Answering the question includes critical reflection on periodization in general and, in particular, on the public's understanding of what is termed (for better or worse) 'the Middle Ages'. The relevance of studying the period has been justified in many ways. It allows, for example, a comparison of social dynamics and the gathering of insights into the role of religion. Equally, it enables investigation of modes of rule and the organization of communities. Ultimately, it enables us to better understand modernity itself. Yet while many arguments concern a better understanding of the contemporary world, they do not necessarily justify the necessity of incorporating medieval comparisons. The current consensus (at least in French medieval studies) is to study the Middle Ages as a society in its own right. There is an additional understanding that the specific problems raised by this period should be placed in a broader chronological and spatial context. These critical reflections invite deeper considerations, which are, in turn, useful in developing our sense of democracy, our understanding of society, and in the development of a historical science that is conscious of the current tendencies to 're-politicize' history. This chapter argues that this leads to invaluable insights into the workings of any discipline concerned with the perception of time and change.

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Turning back – and broadening the question

To raise the question of the interest and relevance of studying and teaching the Middle Ages means, first, to presuppose that there should be debate on the matter and, secondly, that what we call 'the Middle Ages' constitutes a well-defined and clearly

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conceptualized subject. The simple affirmation that the Middle Ages ‘exist’ at all needs to be the starting point for any reflection that seeks to answer the question of whether studying the period constitutes either a ‘useful’ or ‘useless’ endeavour. Each of our initial assumptions, however, must be considered to be problematic. The difficulties they raise are closely intertwined.¹ The twofold nature of the initial question, which appears to be simple only at the most superficial first glance, presupposes two assumptions that might in turn have dangerous or undesirable side-effects: firstly, that the Middle Ages ‘exist’ and, secondly, that the fact of their existence enables us to ask, in a meaningful way, whether studying them is either ‘useful’ or ‘useless’.

The underlying logic of these initial assumptions and their consequences demand explicit elucidation, not least because the very label ‘Middle Ages’ derives from a specific understanding. Introduced by humanists in the sixteenth century, its inventors sought to discredit the entire period that came between the fall of Roman civilization and their own. The term has been repeated continually ever since. Its success and persistent use up to our own day should in fact be considered surprising: it is a persistence that has survived shifts in chronology as well as the arrival of new chrononyms that flank the so-called ‘Middle Ages’ such as ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Late Antiquity’.²

My argument will focus first and foremost on phenomena that concern ‘history’ as an institutionalized academic discipline. There are two principle reasons that might lead scholars of the ‘Middle Ages’, a particular unit in the system of academic periodization of history, to try and justify the usefulness of studying the object of

1 For a first approach to the possibilities and limits of considering the Middle Ages through modern heuristic categories, see the collection of notes “De l’usage de . . . ” published online in the franco-phone medievalists’ platform Menestrel, online: <http://www.menestrel.fr/spip.php?rubrique397&lang=fr> (last accessed 15/05/2019). See also Alain GUERREAU, *L’avenir d’un passé incertain. Quelle histoire du Moyen Âge au XXI^e siècle?*, Paris 2001, pp. 251–274 (“Fréquenter les concepts”).

2 Jacques LE GOFF, *Faut-il vraiment découper l’histoire en tranches?*, Paris 2014. On the matter of traditional and novel periodizations, see Olivier DUMOULIN / Raphaël VALÉRY (eds.), *Périodes. La construction du temps historique*, Paris 1991; Stéphane GIBERT / Jean LE BIHAN / Florian MAZEL (eds.), *Découper le temps. Actualité de la périodisation en histoire*, Rennes 2014; Reinhart HERZOG / Reinhart KOSELLECK (eds.), *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewusstsein (Poetik und Hermeneutik 12)*, Munich 1987; *Revue d’histoire du XIX^e siècle* 25 (2002) (special issue: “Le temps et les historiens”). See also Paul BACOT / Laurent DOUZOU / Jean-Paul HONORÉ, *Chrononymes. La politisation du temps*, in: *Mots. Les langages du politique* 87 (2008), pp. 5–12. For additional consultation, see the table of contents of the journal “Temporalités” on this subject, notably 8 (2008) (special issue: “Les temporalités dans les sciences sociales”); see also Jean LEDUC, *La construction du temps chez les historiens universitaires français de la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle*, in: *Temporalités* 1 (2004), pp. 80–97. Most recently Bernhard JUSSEN has repeatedly argued for the replacement of the notion ‘Middle Ages’, see e. g. ID., *Richtig denken im falschen Rahmen? Warum das “Mittelalter” nicht in den Lehrplan gehört*, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 67(9–10) (2016), pp. 558–576, and ID., *Wer falsch spricht, denkt falsch. Warum Antike, Mittelalter und Neuzeit in die Wissenschaftsgeschichte gehören*, in: *Spekulative Theorien, Kontroversen, Paradigmenwechsel. Streitgespräch in der wissenschaftlichen Sitzung der Versammlung der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften am 25. November 2016 (Debatte 17)*, Berlin 2017, pp. 38–52.

their specialization (and sometimes even to justify its very existence). In the first place, there is an intellectual and heuristic benefit: scrutinizing the very motivations that lead individuals to doubt either a period's existence or the usefulness of studying it helps us to clarify, in an interesting way, the relationship between modern and pre-modern periods and cultures. The so-called 'exoticism', 'strangeness', 'alterity', 'barbarism', 'intolerance', and 'violence' of the Middle Ages – to mention but a few of the highly charged notions that frequently appear and which are often invoked in trying the case of this allegedly dismal and backwards period – are more revealing about the prejudices and fantasies of our own times than about any specific moment of the past. And for this reason alone, the prejudice of the judges would suffice to legitimize studying the Middle Ages: study enables us to get a clearer idea of the distortions. In the second place, the arguments that are and can be mobilized in order to 'explain' the Middle Ages come under the heading of a reflexive epistemology that is always beneficial.

The Problems of Time and Periodization

We can agree that for the above two reasons the medievalists' Middle Ages has no more need than any other period to defend itself; yet, by the same token, nor do specialists in this period have any more reason to evade the question than those working in other periods. The question raised at the beginning of this chapter is therefore directed to all periods and other demarcations of historical time which are fixed and rationalized *a posteriori* for academic, ideological, and institutional purposes. The question either has merit for all fields or for none. The simple explanation for this is that the relationship of our societies to time and history has changed. This is because the social need of history, as a discipline, has evolved.³ History itself – as science, practice, and writing – has changed (for starters, as a result of the internet).⁴ To make the 'non-present present', comprehensible, and in certain respects *necessary*,⁵ functions that both collide and coincide with the contemporaneity of the non-contemporary, is something that properly concerns the whole field of history or, to echo Marc BLOCH,⁶ all processes of historical reflection and understanding that are connected to the modes of functioning and of the transformation of structures of a

3 Gérard NOIRIEL, *Sur la "crise" de l'histoire*, Paris 1996.

4 Jean-Philippe GENET / Andrea ZORZI (eds.), *Les historiens et l'informatique. Un métier à réinventer* (Collection de l'École Française de Rome 444), Rome 2011.

5 Valentin GROEBNER, *Das Mittelalter hört nicht auf. Über historisches Erzählen*, Munich 2008.

6 Marc BLOCH, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou Métier d'historien*, ed. Étienne BLOCH, 2nd ed. Paris 1997 (orig. 1941/42). Recall that the first famous words of the book concern the utility, relevance, legitimacy, or the necessity of history: "Daddy, tell me what history is good for?" ("Papa, explique-moi donc à quoi sert l'histoire?") (Ibid., p. 69.)

society. Applying this perspective actually makes History nothing less than the science of social change over time. And, as such, History can claim to be part of a broad range of ‘pure’ scientific endeavour, that is scientific activity that is not driven by the goal of obtaining profit. In this, as part of the Humanities and the Social Sciences, History is a science precisely because it is historical and thus focusses first and foremost on human actors, individual and collective. Taking into account a certain form of nostalgia and attachment to the past and the approaches imposed by certain media and the seductive nature of everything ‘medieval’ (real and imagined) for a wide range of different modern ideologies, we can understand why the Middle Ages, more than any other period, seem, at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, to be particularly vulnerable to dangerous ideological exploitation. The increasing importance of this exploitation is highlighted dramatically by the way in which the Middle Ages has recently changed its status from being a ‘showcase’ period to become a pleasantly exotic world. As such, it has been ‘re-imported’ into the present day, where it has become part of political strategies that seek to use it as an ideological tool. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in situations where the Middle Ages are introduced as the matrix of a western, Christian civilization, which is purportedly simultaneously ‘under attack’ by Muslim fundamentalism while at the same time endangered by processes of globalization. The latter are in turn interpreted as the death of the nation-state and the end of Europe’s special character and exceptional nature. In this sense, the prominent exploitation of the Middle Ages as an ideological resource – a practice that can conveniently be called ‘medievalism’⁷ – reveals that the problems that might induce a critical debate of medieval history’s value and the status of medieval studies, are part and parcel of a democratic crisis,⁸ a crisis that affects the loss of our contemporary sense of political meaning. The methods and research principles of medievalists themselves, on the other hand, have less to do with current issues.

Specialists of this period, historians whose chronological framework has become very flexible and might in fact be considered to cover the entire time between the end of Antiquity and the turn of the nineteenth century, are confronted with a series of dramatic developments: the globalization of history and the new subjects it introduces (including prominent and ubiquitous calls to ‘de-Europeanize’ history), the overwhelming domination of contemporary history (which goes hand in hand with a regime of historicity marked by the domination of presentism),⁹ an increasing social

7 Janos M. BAK / Jörg JARNUT / Pierre MONNET / Bernd SCHNEIDMÜLLER (eds.), *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters, 19.–21. Jahrhundert / Uses and Abuses of the Middle Ages, 19th–21th Century / Usages et mésusages du Moyen Âge du XIX^e au XXI^e siècle* (Mittelalter-Studien 17), Munich 2009.

8 Tommaso DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI, *Médiéval et militant. Penser le contemporain à travers le Moyen Âge*, Paris 2015.

9 Jérôme BASCHET, *L’histoire face au présent perpétuel. Quelques remarques sur la relation passé / futur*, in: François HARTOG / Jacques REVEL (eds.), *Les usages politiques du passé*, Paris 2001,

demand – something, as I noted above, that is increasingly exploited and used as a political instrument – addressed to the entire body of historians in the context of public and patrimonial debates over sites of memory, and, no less significantly, the major thematic and methodologic reorientations in the study of medieval society that have occurred in recent decades. Like it or not, specialists have recently engaged in, voluntarily or involuntarily, a self-reflective exercise concerning their approach to, and the object of, their knowledge. This is obviously a development that should be welcomed.

How to use a Social Science

From the guild of medievalists themselves came a series of rather cautious reassessments. These remained strictly historiographical and methodological, and were primarily addressed to other professional or academic historians.¹⁰ Beyond these, several attempts have been made to respond to the question of the necessity and relevance of the study of the Middle Ages – or, at the very least, a certain understanding of the medieval – not only in academia but in society in general. Many of these latter, with a readership that stretches beyond a narrow circle of colleagues and specialists in mind, have tried consciously to demonstrate the usefulness of the Middle Ages by underlining their contemporary relevance.¹¹

Numerous other attempts have tried to locate an argument for relevance on the general scientific and cultural specificity of the subject or the terrain called the

pp. 55–74; François HARTOG, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris 2003.

10 An excellent overview of the debate is Joseph MORSEL / Christine DUCOURTIEUX, *L'histoire (du Moyen Âge) est un sport de combat . . . Réflexions sur les finalités de l'Histoire du Moyen Âge destinées à une société dans laquelle même les étudiants d'Histoire s'interrogent*, (s. l.) 2007, online: <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00290183> (last accessed 15/05/2019). On the German side, see Michael BORGOLTE (ed.), *Mittelalterforschung nach der Wende 1989* (Historische Zeitschrift. Beiheft. N.F. 20), Munich 1994; Hans-Werner GOETZ (ed.), *Moderne Mediävistik: Stand und Perspektiven der Mittelalterforschung*, Darmstadt 1999; ID. (ed.), *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters* (Herausforderungen 10), Bochum 2000; ID. / Jörg JARNUT (eds.), *Mediävistik im 21. Jahrhundert. Stand und Perspektiven der internationalen und interdisziplinären Mittelalterforschung* (MittelalterStudien 1), Munich 2003; Peter MORAW / Rudolf SCHIEFFER (eds.), *Die deutschsprachige Mediävistik im 20. Jahrhundert* (Vorträge und Forschungen 62), Ostfildern 2005. On the French side, see Jacques LE GOFF / Guy LOBRICHON (eds.), *Le Moyen Âge aujourd'hui*, Paris 1997; SHMESP (ed.), *Être historien du Moyen Âge au XXI^e siècle*, Paris 2008. For a comparative Franco-German approach, see Otto Gerhard OEXLE / Jean-Claude SCHMITT (eds.), *Les tendances actuelles de l'histoire du Moyen Âge en France et en Allemagne*, Paris 2003.

11 Gerd ALTHOFF (ed.), *Die Deutschen und ihr Mittelalter. Themen und Funktionen moderner Geschichtsbilder vom Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 1992; Joachim HEINZLE (ed.), *Modernes Mittelalter. Neue Bilder einer populären Epoche*, Frankfurt / Main 1990; Horst FUHRMANN (ed.), *Überall ist Mittelalter. Von der Gegenwart einer vergangenen Zeit*, Munich 1996.

Middle Ages. In this regard, one might cite Johannes FRIED's book, which justifies the relevance of the Middle Ages for the present by highlighting the existence of a medieval 'knowledge society' that cultivated the intrinsic unity of all fields of knowledge. According to FRIED, it was this particular structure, which represents the complete opposite of the present day with its fragmentation of the sciences, different fields of knowledge, and perspectives, that actually gave birth to modern 'knowledge' and science.¹² Jérôme BASCHET's study of the global social dynamic of the Middle Ages within the paradigm of the ecclesio-feudal order – that is, a style of domination characterized by a logic of service and salvation which controls and dominates through a new combination of the spiritual and the corporeal – proceeds in a different mode but in a similar spirit. BASCHET analyses the cultural techniques that were deployed to command nature, the historicization of time, and Christian universalism. In so doing, he underlines how all these elements combine and simultaneously become the condition and the legacy of the West in its initiatives of colonial conquest.¹³

In both the above instances we might note that the exposition is not placed under any heading that involves the 'usefulness' of the Middle Ages as defined by the period's capacity to explain the present day. This distinguishes both approaches from the multitude of other works which usually do just that. One example of the latter done in a particularly bad way concerns the 'crusades' and 'holy war' in cases where authors assess both in the context of a supposed clash of civilizations and religion between the Christian West and Islam.¹⁴ Instead of proposing analogies that are as easy to draw as they are erroneous, FRIED and BASCHET underline the necessity of taking into account the specificities and dynamics of the Middle Ages in order to understand with precision, by comparison or imitation – and in BASCHET's case by creation and rupture – why our present has become what it is and why it maintains a troubled relationship with the Middle Ages in particular. This is a relationship that the late Otto Gerhard OEXLE described as a cleft or a split.¹⁵ More recently, a collection of essays has attempted to move beyond the simple justification of studying the Middle Ages by way of underlining their relationship to the present.

12 Johannes FRIED, *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters*, Stuttgart 2002.

13 Jérôme BASCHET, *La civilisation féodale. De l'an mil à la colonisation de l'Amérique*, Paris 2006.

14 It is not unimportant that the latest significant scandal involving the Middle Ages and medievalists to be reported in the French media dates back to the polemics triggered in 2008 (and lasting until 2011) by the appearance of Sylvain GOUGUENHEIM, *Aristote au Mont-Saint-Michel*, Paris 2008, a book about the translation and transmission – or not – of the works of Aristotle by the Greek or Muslim world, and therefore about the major – or minor – role of the intervention of Arabic in the importation and acculturation of a whole portion of classical political literature in the European and Latin culture of the Middle Ages. For some elements of the ensuing controversy, see e. g. Philippe BÜTTGEN / Alain DE LIBERA / Marwan RASHED / Irène ROSIER-CATACH (eds.), *Les Grecs, les Arabes et nous. Enquête sur l'islamophobie savante*, Paris 2009.

15 Otto Gerhard OEXLE, *Das entzweite Mittelalter*, in: ALTHOFF (note 11), pp. 7–28.

Here the period is understood as the ‘object’ of scientific scrutiny. These scholars have tried to rehabilitate the Middle Ages’ epistemological and heuristic status as an indispensable link in a long-term social dynamic in the West, one which cannot be ignored if we want to understand the latter’s development. This allows us to speak of the study of this period in terms of real ‘necessity’. In the course of a long-term development that unfolds from the fifth to the eighteenth century, the relationships between individuals, family/kin, space, and religion were fundamentally re-structured in comparison with what preceded and what followed.¹⁶ In this sense the authors of this collective work respond to the question of ‘why study the Middle Ages’ not primarily by exploring ‘how’ (practices, writing, sources, etc.) or with a ‘because’ answer. Rather, they claim, and wholeheartedly embrace, the idea that ‘medieval history’ should have the status of an Historical Science. Its practice can tell us much about the relationship between History and the Social Sciences, between past and present, and about the fundamental structural elements of a complex human society. On the basis of this approach, the term ‘Middle Ages’ can be replaced by ‘medieval society’.

If one wanted to summarize a ‘French’ voice – if such a thing even exists (and it has to legitimize itself by way of comparison with other historiographical traditions in Europe) – in a debate that seeks to elucidate the reasons one might put forward in order to argue in favour of the legitimacy and necessity of the study of the Middle Ages, we might identify a set of characteristics. Since this chapter seeks to retain the experimental nature that underlies the entire present volume, I will briefly discuss these reasons in an approach that combines critique and comparison.

Some Suggestions

These characteristics notably include:

- 1) the persistent but nevertheless not always accepted recognition that we still do not really know how to work in a comparative way, that is between countries, periods, etc.,
- 2) the belief that history remains an entity that consists of a chronological unit, of a fixed set of concepts, and tools,
- 3) the precocious integration, by the Annales School, of anthropological and sociological issues (analysing and understanding ‘the social’ by all available methods, in other words: treating the Middle Ages as a ‘laboratory’),
- 4) the status of historical science (including the medieval period), which is secured through the structures that ensure the training of elites for the (French)

¹⁶ Didier MÉHU / Neri DE BARROS ALMEIDA / Marcelo CÂNDIDO DA SILVA (eds.), *Pourquoi étudier le Moyen Âge? Les médiévistes face aux usages sociaux du passé*, Paris 2012.

- Republic and which, in turn, stress the study of history as a project of national identity and as an instrument of democratic acculturation, and
- 5) the general integration of History as a discipline and as a general way of thinking in an ideological field that can be characterized as progressive rather than conservative. This leads, to put it briefly, to an interpretation of the long-term process that some have chosen to call ‘European exceptionalism’ or ‘divergence’ as the original model. It would thus constitute a non-replicable and non-reproducible model of the organization of parental, spatial, and economic links in the service of a specific social and cultural constellation that was, from an anthropological perspective, based on domination over people and land. The links in question would include the types of resource use, remunerated labour, levies on a free but controlled peasantry, household autonomy, urbanization, organization of the monotheist sacred in the dimension of space, monetarization of the economy without monetarization of economic decision-making, articulation of body and spirit based on a specific relationship between culture and nature, and the historicization of time.

‘De-medievalizing’ the Problem

In order to answer the question of whether a historical science devoted to the Middle Ages is relevant we should avoid arguing on a purely ontological level, even if this dimension can still play a role, by affirming that ‘the study of the Middle Ages is essential because the Middle Ages exist’. Nor can the answer be teleological; Marc BLOCH would have spoken of the “idol of origins”, meaning either a period for which one feels nostalgia for a lost time or an era from which Europe did well to free itself though rejection. Finally, we cannot rely exclusively on the argument that studying the Middle Ages contributes to a better understanding of our own present and its phenomena of stratification, its relationship to the religious, or its specific construction of politics and identity. After all, one suspects it is not so much the content of each of these positions that is important today, but rather their combination, their public and academic implications, and their integration into a scientific project that is conscious of the triple specificity and the triple historicity of its objects, its methodology, and its subjects. This project must be attentive to the profound changes that affect the study of history and that arise from the questions that historians choose to ask, but also to history’s uses, its techniques (notably the widespread electronic access to sources and the online publication of research results), and its public. For there exist multiple ‘Middle Ages’, not only in the sense of an historiography, of a period, of a professional discipline, of a specific critical methodology that governs the handling and interpretation of the sources, and of a narrative, but also in the sense of concepts, of a teaching method, and of the uses of the past. These plural, parallel, and competing definitions, carry within themselves one or more contradictions whose very unmasking is actually

part and parcel of the definition of the subject and therefore its legitimacy. Politicians and the media, to the contrary, would rather that we seek the best ways to essentialize history and to arrange it in a streamlined narrative.

How should we react to these multiple and ideologically motivated expectations? On a very first level, our argument should be based on the assumption that historical knowledge is indivisible (if not unique). Otherwise, we risk reviving internal divisions between the different periods and the academics who represent them, and thereby elevating the importance of one period over another. If we take the initial assertion seriously, it will inevitably lead to the conviction that medievalists possess a wide and open field of enquiry that they can cultivate at the crossroads of Anthropology, the Humanities, and Social Sciences, while their work remains organized around the fundamental need to understand the social production of change in a given period. In order to plead in favour of the relevance of the Middle Ages, a second argument might be added, which fundamentally relies on the unity of the problems that are raised by the observation of history or asked by historians. This unity exists no matter what the individual research question is, whether we work on the history of women, of the individual, of power, of coercion, of rituals, and so on. In all these cases, serious research can never focus exclusively on the Middle Ages, yet it cannot afford to ignore the period either!

Once this preliminary framework is established, the problem of the relevance of medieval studies encourages us to revisit the question of what we might call ‘secondary’ characteristics of the period. Which elements make the Middle Ages specific and unique, so that the period can neither be merged with another nor exchanged with it, whether that other is its predecessor or successor? In addition, we might ask which mental and structural patterns were characteristic of the Middle Ages and its organization of the social field.

Changing the Vocabulary

Asking these questions and discussing the answers can have two results. Firstly, it might lead us to rename the ‘Middle Ages’. Rather, we might start to talk about ‘medieval society’, as, for example, Joseph MORSEL has proposed. MORSEL systematically argues for a label that invites attention to a double orientation, temporal and social.¹⁷ Secondly, we might begin to realize that what we collectively refer to as the

¹⁷ Joseph MORSEL, *L’Histoire (du Moyen Âge) est un sport de combat . . . deux ans après: retour sur une tentative de légitimation sociale*, in: MÉHU / DE BARROS ALMEIDA / CÂNDIDO DA SILVA (note 16), pp. 61–92. In fact, one might also justify the study of the Middle Ages because it makes us aware of the importance of long-term processes when our own societies are currently heavily dominated by a fixation on the short term.

'Middle Ages' represents nothing more (but also nothing less) than the only period in history that is complete, (more or less clearly) delimited, and documented, and which enables us to observe the beginning and the end of a unique and original social process. This process is characterized by specific parameters that involve the place of religious institutions, the mode of production and work, and the organization of political powers, to name but the most obvious. Thus, the real question is, whether the Middle Ages are 'relevant' because of the specific way in which medievalists analyse medieval society – and because of the relationship between this approach to (or its integration into) a broader practice of understanding change that emanates from the Social Sciences.

In other words, if the 'house of the Middle Ages' is on fire and medievalists are 'firefighters' who may either save it or bury its remains, the cause of the flames themselves lies in reasons that far surpass any intrinsic quality ascribed to the period. Instead, their true origins concern our more general relationship to the past: they include the social demands which confront historians in the twenty-first century, demands that differ from those that faced their nineteenth-century counterparts at a time when History was first constituted as an academic and scientific discipline. The status of the humanities – and more broadly, of the intellectual – has changed in a society that has become addicted to the instant and to technology. Finally, global systems of values and representations have changed.

A Central Question: What do we Lose and What do we Gain?

In view of all of these points, the relevance of the Middle Ages must be reconsidered not *despite* but *because of* these new factors and the environment they create. That relevance must be rethought as part of an intellectual exercise and therefore of an activity that wholeheartedly acknowledges its ideological character. In fact, from this perspective, nothing could be worse than a renewal of scholarly demand for autonomy and learned isolation. The meaning of this exercise is not at its core attached to a chronology composed of dates (for example 410–1492, from the 'fall' of Rome to the 'discovery' of America). Instead, it is rather generated by the questions it brings forth and by the problems it focusses on. The questions concern a subject that occupies a specific place in space and time and whose development was characterized by accidents. This latter should be underlined against all attempts to create erroneous continuities and teleological interpretations. The problems cannot be boiled down to the deadly triptych of 'altérité, identité, européenité' – alterity, identity, and 'European-ness'. From this perspective the real focus of our reflections about the relevance of the Middle Ages should lie in considering the question of the added scientific value of medieval studies in relation to other historical and social projects: What do we

lose and what do we gain if we either ignore or try to understand ten to fifteen centuries of history? How do the processes of identification and separation between the Middle Ages and ourselves play out today? How can we argue for the usefulness and relevance of the Middle Ages without falling into the tyranny of a utilitarian discourse that unconsciously condemns medievalists to navigate exclusively between the poles of continuity and alterity?

On the whole, there is obviously no inherent or overarching obligation to study the Middle Ages. The only exception to that statement might be professional medievalists themselves, who do have an immediate (and very material) interest in saving either jobs that are threatened by budget-cuts or certain budgetary elements in specific contexts and institutions. Today, medievalists are in fact confronted with criticism or at least with questions that are addressed to their community as a whole and that concern their subject of study. The very existence of this criticism and of these questions should be reason enough to pause and to listen – we should neither challenge nor dismiss the concerns raised and the underlying motivations connected with them out of hand.¹⁸ Instead, our real concern should be to try and find, together, the reasons why the observation of a world that has disappeared furnishes helpful ‘food for thought’ in our present. We should work this out in cooperation, while practising history as a Social Science and as a Cultural Science. The world of the Middle Ages has all but disappeared entirely. Yet the period actually imposes itself on us because it represents at least ten centuries of spatial and social transformation that spans an entire continent. And it furnishes ‘food for thought’ because it strengthens our sense of history, our sense of democracy, our understanding of society, which is inevitably multiple and complex in nature. But all of this is only true as long we continue to approach the Middle Ages as an historical science that is conscious of the repoliticization of history, of its imperative for self-reflection, of the common interests it shares with other disciplines and of approaches to the perception of time and change.

18 Of course, one could, sooner or later, do away with the ‘medieval’ discipline, university chairs, or ‘medieval’ institutes. Yet doing so could erase neither what happened during the period itself nor the relationship that contemporary people necessarily have with it.

