The Erasure of the Middle Ages from Anthropology's Intellectual Genealogy


anthropology does not have a neatly defined proto-discipline making the exploration of its historical development more difficult

“...no consensus over when and where to locate the naissance of the anthropological impulse.” 337

three periods receive much attention: 18th century of Enlightenment/Romanticism; 15th/16th centuries of Renaissance and Exploration; and Classical World

ignore/don't recognize medieval period as a period of "authentic" anthropological inquiry

3 prevalent historical misconceptions used to exclude Middle Ages from history of anthropological inquiry

1. medieval not interested in anthropological questions
2. no tradition of realistic medieval ethnographic writing
3. intolerant nature of medieval society inhibited development of “true” anthropological inquiry

scholars who see anthropology as the study of humanity trace origins to the enlightenment

scholars who see anthropology as the study of cultural relativism trace origins to Romantic movement

scholars looking beyond to 15/16th c connect inquiry to the rise of modernity

medieval period often portrayed as an impetus or stagnation to the development of anthropological inquiry

medieval often describes not just a historical era but a state of mind

association of medieval period with Catholic Church has led to the false assumption that concern with the supernatural dominated/overrode any concern with nature or natural laws

“Contrary to the common notion that classical thought was “lost” during the Middle Ages...medieval philosophers drew heavily on the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Cicero, Pliny, and other ancient thinkers to address these profound issues. In fact, Greek and Roman ideas exerted a major influence on medieval anthropologies in areas such as the importance of climate and geography in explaining human physical and cultural variation, the division of the world into “civilized” and “barbarian” societies, and the fundamental tension between reason and “the passions” in human nature. These ancient theoretical concepts had to be integrated into a Christian framework premised upon the authority of scripture and the writings of the Church fathers.” 341 this is true but only for certain later parts of the Middle Ages...how then can we address the earlier part beyond simply moving this “break” with the past to a specific earlier point in the Middle Ages themselves?

“...any investigation of medieval anthropologies must also consider how Europeans during this period constructed and encountered the cultural Other.” 342

the often assumed medieval mind governed by rigid orthodoxy or mindless conformity is merely a caricature and not a valid reflection of the complexity and variability of beliefs, customs, tolerance, and dogmatism

“It is critical to recognize that anthropologists are not alone in perpetuating a stereotyped view of the Middle Ages. Despite ongoing efforts from medievalists to challenge these misconceptions...a medieval/modern periodization continues to shape the disciplinary agendas of political science..., sociology..., geography..., literature..., and postcolonial studies....“345 such concepts of the medieval as a break also affect our understanding of it’s relationship to periods before it as well. the medieval is fundamentally conceptualized through periodization as a period of loss and need for relearning...is this accurate or is there a different way to conceptualize it? (break? fall? decline? transformation?)

“...“medievalism”, like Orientalism, arose out of Western modernity’s need to establish a sense of cultural and historical coherence. In other words, just as postcolonial thinkers have long recognized that the ideological category of “the West” only emerged with the construction of a “not-West”...so too did the “modern” require a premodern (medieval) foil against which it could secure its own identity...” 346

both the origin of modern nation-states as well as a primitive body to define the modern nation against

“IT is important to recognize that medieval thought deserves greater inclusion in the history of anthropological inquiry, but not because the Middle Ages were a paragon of multicultural openness or unfettered intellectual inquiry. There is no question that medieval approaches to human nature and the cultural Other rested on a metaphysical framework and a set of assumptions quite distinct from ancient, early modern, or contemporary anthropologies. Therefore, we must eschew the presentist temptation to “recover” only those particular elements of medieval thought that forewshadow contemporary ideas, while ignoring those aspects that do not. Rather, we must adopt a historicist approach that explores the strengths and limitation of medieval thought on its own terms.” 346