When We Talk about Modernity


“What if our alleged ancestors were to reclaim their heritage? What if peoples of the past were to reject the “civilizing mission” of modernity and insist on the sovereignty of their indigenous cultures? What if they could speak for themselves?” 716

“Those who resist the hegemony of modernity will still end up bolstering it, because there is no way to study “medieval” people for their own sake or on their own terms.” 716

In some cases the Middle Ages is devoid of history, and instead acts as a counterpoint/justification for Modernity

...she demonstrates that the discovery of a “new world” unsettled Europeans’ understanding of their own history at the very same time that competing claims to national sovereignty were being based on fictions of a “feudal age” from which some states had allegedly emerged triumphant, with a warrant to subjugate or colonize those who could be deemed throwbacks to that fictitious past.” 719

“Rather ironically, the word “modern” appears to have been coined during the Middle Ages, more specifically in the first decades of the ninth century C.E., to describe the renewal of Roman imperial glories in the age of Charlemagne and hence to throw the foregoing era into shadow.” 719 Break with the early Middle Ages begins in the Middle Ages

How can one avoid the “juggernaut of modernity’s grand narrative” (721) in a study of the Middle Ages?

The ambiguity of the period’s definition and subdefinitions are not merely a result of different regional chronologies and developments but are also an active rewriting of history to place undesired traits/people in the past while simultaneously claiming desirable movements/peoples

Functions of Middle Ages

1. Penal colony for modernity undesirable elements (torture, witch-hunts, radical Islam)
2. Womb of modernity/authenticity of modern nations

“‘Theory’ has been domesticated without having accomplished its most basic task, namely the deconstruction of the prevailing notion of modernity.” 723 Very packed statement—must reflect on this to unpack it

Bloch’s “idol of origins” joined by the fetish of modernity

“The default position for many medievalists is therefore to prove the relevance and usefulness of “the Middle Ages” by making it modernity’s point of origin” 724 What is the alternative?

Is the Middle Ages a discrete epoch or a value judgement?

...these fictive efforts, the efforts that have created “the modern world,” “the Middle Ages,” “the Enlightenment,” the fall of Rome,” the “prehistoric era,” are not just methodologically troubling (which is troubling enough) but ideologically suspect.” 724 More evidence of shared problems faced by medievalists