

K. Patrick Fazioli, *The Mirror of the Medieval. An Anthropology of the Western Historical Imagination*, New York, Oxford (Berghahn) 2017, X–195 p., 2 plans, 6 fig. (Making Sense of History. Studies in Metahistory, Historiography, Historical Culture, and Intercultural Communication, 29), ISBN 978-1-78533-544-0, GBP 78,00.

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That historians of medieval Europe (and perhaps especially of the earlier Middle Ages) have drawn liberally from the theoretical and methodological toolkits of anthropology, as well as from the data of ethnographic studies, has scarcely gone unnoticed. While some medievalists have simply found it useful to heuristically »think with« the likes of Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Douglas, Turner, and Geertz, others have borrowed more substantively from modern, fieldwork-based accounts of cultures with »premodern« characteristics ostensibly analogous to medieval Europe, in order to test hypotheses concerning, among other topics, the functions of ritual, gift-giving, or social and familial structures. Their *tristes tropiques*, so to speak, were Merovingian Gaul, Visigothic Spain, and Bede's post-Roman Britain, divided among various *bretwalda*-chieftains. The problematic assumptions, and (allegedly cryptotheological) intellectual genealogy, underlying such cross-disciplinary endeavors fueled one of the more notable controversies in twenty-first-century medieval historiography, ignited by Phillippe Buc's radically skeptical »The Dangers of Ritual. Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory« (2001). Yet, in contrast to this interest, appropriation, and debate, anthropologists – K. Patrick Fazioli suggests – have typically ignored both modern scholarship on the Middle Ages and the Middle Ages themselves. Because medieval historians are concerned with subjects that are seemingly hermetically European and seemingly (almost) exclusively Christian, their work has long been assumed to be of little interest for anthropologists studying the non-European, non-Christian »Other«. Meanwhile, the European Middle Ages are likewise dismissed as effectively irrelevant to the history of anthropological inquiry due to the broadly shared assertion that the discipline of anthropology is inherently modern.

In »The Mirror of the Medieval«, Fazioli – writing as an experienced anthropologist with a strong background in both medieval history and archaeology – vigorously challenges these views and reflects on their consequences. The first part of the book, comprising three chapters, argues for what Fazioli terms an »anthropology of historicity«, that is, a critical, de-naturalizing approach to (modern, Western) historical thinking. In Chapter 1, Fazioli contends that while anthropologists, in recent decades, have fruitfully problematized nearly every aspect of Western culture that had once been regarded as natural, normal, or even universal, the assumption of history's general reliability and



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utility – history as *magistra vitae* – has been conspicuously accepted by anthropologists. Fazioli attributes this problem, in part, to the often-remarked ambiguity of on the one hand history as all past times and events and on the other hand historiographical writing – a perennial point of confusion in English, which lacks, for instance, the German language's distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. The consequence of this ambiguity, at least for Anglophones, is that a mode of historical thinking – typically, »linear, singular, [with a] spatialized conception of historical time« – that may, perhaps, be peculiar to the modern West has been conflated with the past itself, and together tacitly accepted as irreducible givens. As an antidote to the primacy accorded to this type of historical thinking, Fazioli suggests that the theoretical tools and material-centered data of archaeology can help anthropologists to engage with other possible temporalities. By this means, scholars may be better equipped to critique the notion that »history has a singular, inescapable trajectory«, an assumption that has carried profound consequences for modern projects of colonization and state formation – and for the pragmatic deployments of the past that have enabled these projects.

The foundations for such modern uses of the past are the subject of Fazioli's second chapter, which begins with a brief synopsis of the traditional/popular view of the Middle Ages as a »dark« period dividing Greco-Roman antiquity from its ostensible rebirth in the Renaissance. Fazioli proceeds to show the ways in which this fundamentally negative conception of medieval Europe was constructed, discussing, first, the prerogatives and strategies of Petrarch and subsequent scholars like Leonardo Bruni and Giovanni Andrea Bussi. Little in this brief discussion will be new or surprising to historians of medieval or early modern Europe, but Fazioli's summary of this discursive phenomenon may be useful to anthropologists with different areas of focus. Drawing heavily from anthropologist Johannes Fabian's classic study, »Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object« (1983) as well as from historian Kathleen Davis's more recent monograph, »Periodization and Sovereignty. How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time« (2008), Fazioli draws potent connections between the ideological function of the medieval »Other«, initially fashioned as such by Renaissance humanists, and the colonial, non-Western »Other«. As Fazioli clearly and articulately shows, these respective »Others« can both be regarded as far removed from modern »civilization« precisely because the spatio-temporal metaphor, whereby perceived difference is equated with »distance«, has become so deeply embedded in modern historical thinking. Fazioli might have benefitted much here from more engagement with recent theoretical work on the concept and rhetoric of »historical distance«, spearheaded, in particular, by Mark Salber Phillips. This important work dovetails in key respects with Fazioli's argument, while challenging some of his conclusions – showing, for instance, that the strategies and uses of distantiation in historiography (the spatio-temporal historical time that Fazioli critiques) have remained dynamic, malleable, and subject to changing political and intellectual circumstances across the centuries of Western modernity, even as they



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have continuously contributed to the reification of an historical master-narrative of linear progress toward civilization.

Fazioli's third chapter provides another cogent reason why anthropologists should pay closer attention to the European Middle Ages: because, contrary to the disciplinary lineages typically presented by anthropologists, substantive engagement with anthropological questions can be detected in certain examples of medieval ethnographic writing itself. In contrast to Isidore of Seville's »Etymologiae« and »The Travels of Sir John Mandeville«, often noted for their bizarre and often monstrous representations of (probably unencountered) »Others«, Fazioli turns to the relatively sober, first-hand accounts of Wales and the Mongol empire found in, respectively, Gerald of Wales' »Descriptio Kambriae« and William of Rubruck's »De moribus Tartarorum«. This chapter, adapted from an earlier, excellent article by Fazioli, is sensitive in its analysis of these texts and generally convincing, at least from a medievalist historian's standpoint. Fazioli's essential point is that, rather than any real epistemic rupture dividing medieval from modern thought and suddenly facilitating anthropological inquiry, there was significant continuity across these (arbitrarily demarcated) periods. The medieval's specular function in modern discourse has been roughly comparable to that of Edward Said's Orient. By paying closer attention to the actual texts and material traces of the Middle Ages, Fazioli suggests that anthropologists will recognize this commonality, and will better understand its intimate ideological connection to the implicit privileging of modern historical thinking, on the one hand, and the particular structures of Western power and domination, on the other hand.

The book's second part consists of case studies, demonstrating the critical, alternate approaches to studying the past and problematizing normative historical thought that Fazioli advocates in Part I. Building from his dissertation research, Fazioli focuses on the eastern Alpine region, and how the variable emplotment of this region's early medieval past has been appropriated to very different ends by nineteenth-century German imperialists, followed, in turn, by the Nazis (chapter 4) and by Slovenian nationalists (chapter 5). While the former sought to show that the Slavic groups of this region had no culture of their own, but only benefitted from the importation of Germanic (in the first place, Frankish) culture, the latter have identified an apparent golden age of proto-Slovenian civilization between the dissolution of the Roman Empire and the beginnings of oppressive Germanic rule. These opposed readings of the past are symptomatic of the ambiguity, inherent subjectivity, and relative paucity of written sources for the early medieval eastern Alpine region. At the same time, such approaches also stem from the long-held modern belief that the origins of European ethnicities can be located in the post-Roman landscape. In recent decades, historians such as Patrick Geary, Walter Pohl, and Helmut Reimitz have done much to dismantle this dangerous belief, and few serious scholars would explicitly operate from it today. Yet, in popular consciousness, the notion of ethnically homogeneous »barbarian« tribes continues to hold some romantic appeal, not least among resurgent right-wing nationalist factions. Building from the wealth of recent scholarship on the



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»transformation of the Roman world«, Fazioli argues that issues of (Latin vs. German vs. Slavic) ethnicity can be fruitfully confounded through a focus on »communities of practice«. Rather than trying to determine the extent to which early medieval gentes ever constituted discrete ethnic groups, Fazioli deftly sidesteps this thorny issue by showing instead how technological choices for creating, e.g., coarse-ware pottery varied over both time and space across the eastern Alpine region between ca. 300 and 900. The highly localized patterns of material production that Fazioli sketches complicate ethnicity-centered accounts, providing a more nuanced image of this region in the early Middle Ages and bolstering Fazioli's case for using archaeological evidence as a check on text-based histories.

The seventh and final chapter mounts a similar case for drawing upon archaeological methodology and theory to challenge standard narratives of »Christianization«. Fazioli returns to his book's initial discussion of a linear, spatio-temporal scheme, and how its assumed dominance obscures other ways of experiencing time and assessing change vis-à-vis continuity. Here, the naturalization of »historical time« is tied to the purportedly all-pervasive triumph of Christianity across medieval Europe – a process that Fazioli, noting the continuing importance of pagan sacred sites and their sometime pragmatic refashioning by ecclesiastical leaders, suggests was more uneven and partial than some scholars once believed. Of course, the idea of uniform and total »Christianization« has long been questioned and qualified by historians of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, who have recognized this characterization of orthodox European Christendom as aspirational and performative in the texts of ambitious Christian writers. Frustrating any attempt to quantitatively measure the extent of »Christianization« is – above all – the problem of determining what Christianity was or what it meant in different times and places. Fazioli hints at this complex problem in his discussion of »syncretism«, although this term is itself somewhat questionable and too loosely employed in its application here. While such a comparison may indeed be helpful toward making the early medieval context readily intelligible and attractive to anthropologists, this should not be achieved at the expense of the substantial differences between early medieval Europe and modern, non-Western contexts that anthropologists have recognized as »syncretistic«.

Such misgivings aside, Fazioli's book, on the whole, marks a vital and welcome contribution to interdisciplinary engagement, connecting academic »communities of practice« that really should be in closer, if cautious, conversation. One can only hope that more anthropologists will follow Fazioli's call for an »anthropology of historicity« and, in particular, for greater consideration of the ideological stakes underlying the production of historical knowledge about medieval Europe. Perhaps, then, through such cross-disciplinary dialogue, medieval historians might begin to repay their long-standing debt to anthropology.



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