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HISTORICAL PERIODISATION - PART 1

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It was fascinating to meet with twenty-three others on a humid June afternoon to debate what might appear to be abstruse questions of Law & Historical Periodisation. We were attending a special conference at Birkbeck College, London University – an institution (founded in 1823 as the London Mechanics Institute) committed as always to extending the boundaries of knowledge. The participants came from the disciplines of law, history, philosophy, and literary studies. And many were students, including, laudably, some interested undergraduates who were attending in the vacation.

At stake was not the question of whether we can generalise about different and separate periods of the past. Obviously we can and must to some extent. Even the most determined advocate of history as ‘one and indivisible’ has to accept some sub-divisions for operative purposes, whether in terms of days, years, centuries or millennia.

But the questions really coalesce about temporal ‘stages’, such as the ‘mediaeval’ era. Are such concepts relevant and helpful? Is history rightly divided into successive stages? and do they follow in regular sequence in different countries, even if at different times? Or is there a danger of reifying these epochs – turning them into something more substantive and distinctive than was actually the case?

Studies like H.O. Taylor’s *The Medieval Mind* (1919 and many later editions), Benedicta Ward’s *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (1982), William Manchester’s *The Medieval Mind and the Renaissance* (Boston, 1992), and Stephen Currie’s *Miracles, Saints and Superstition: The Medieval Mind* (2006), all imply that there were common properties to the mind-sets of millions of Europeans who lived between (roughly) the fifth-century fall of Rome and the

fifteenth-century discovery of the New World – and that these mindsets differed sharply from the ‘modern mind’. Yet are these historians justified in choosing this formula within their titles? Or partly justified? or absolutely misleading? Are there common features within human consciousness and experiences that refute these periodic cut-off points? Do we want to go to the other end of the spectrum, to endorse the view of those Evolutionary Psychologists who aver that human mentalities have not changed since the Stone Age? Forever he, whether Tarzan, Baldrick or Kevin? forever she, whether Jane, Elwisia or Tracey?

Two papers by Kathleen Davis (University of Rhode Island) and Peter Fitzpatrick (Birkbeck College) formed the core of the conference, both focusing upon the culture of jurisprudence and its standard definition of the medieval. Both give stimulating critiques of conventional legal assumptions, based upon stark dichotomies. In bare summary, the ‘medieval’ is supposed to be Christianised, feudal, and customary, while the ‘modern’ is supposedly secular, rights-based, and centred around the sovereign state. For good measure, the former is by implication backward and oppressive, while the latter is progressive and enlightened. Yet the long history of legal pluralism goes against any such dichotomy in practice. Historians like Helen Cam, who in 1941 wrote *What of Medieval England is Alive in England Today?* would have rejoiced at these papers, and at the sharp questions from the conference participants.

For my part, I was asked to give a final summary, based upon my position as a critic of all simple stage theories of history.¹ My first point was to stress again how difficult it is to rethink periodisation, because so many cardinal assumptions are built not only into academic language but also into academic structures. Many specialists name themselves after their periods – as ‘medievalists’, ‘modernists’ or whatever. Those who call themselves just ‘historians’ are seen as too vague – or suffering from *folie de grandeur*. There are mutterings about the fate of Arnold Toynbee, once hailed as the twentieth-

century's greatest historian-philosopher – now virtually forgotten. Academic posts within departments of History and Literary Studies are generally defined by timespans. So are examination papers; many academic journals; many conferences; and so forth. Publishers in particular, who pay great attention to book titles, often endorse traditional nomenclature and stage divisions.

True, there are now increasing calls for change. My second point therefore highlights the new diversity. Conferences and seminars are held not only across disciplinary boundaries but also across epochal divisions. An increasing number of books are published with unusual start and end dates; and the variety of dates attached to the traditional periods continues to multiply, often confusingly. In addition, some scholars now study 'big' (long-term) history from the start of the world, or at least from the start of human history. Their approaches do not always manage to avoid traditional schema but the aim is to encourage a new diachronic sweep. And other pressures for change are coming from scholars in new fields of history, such as women's history or (not the same thing) the history of sexuality.

Shedding the old period terminology is mentally liberating. So the Italian historian Massimo Montanari, previously a 'medievalist', wrote in 1994 of the happiness that followed his discarding of all the labels of 'ancient', 'medieval' and 'modern: 'In the end, I felt freed as from a restrictive and artificial scaffolding ...'²

Lastly, then, what of the future? The aim is not to replace one set of period terms and dates with another. Any rival set will run into the same difficulties of detecting precise cut-off points and the risk of stereotyping the different cultures and societies on either side of a period boundary. It is another example of dichotomous thinking, which glosses over the complexities of the past. Above all, all stage theories fail to incorporate the elements of deep continuity within history (see my November 2010 discussion-point).

We need a new way of thinking about the intertwining of persistence and change within history. It is chiefly a matter of understanding. But it will also entail a change of language. I don't personally endorse the Foucauldian view that language actually determines consciousness. For me, primacy in the relationship is the other way round. A changing consciousness can ultimately change language. Yet I do recognise the confining effects of existing concepts and terminology upon patterns of thought. Such an impact is another example of the power of continuity. With several bounds, however, historians can become free. With a new language, we can talk about epochs *and* continuities, intertwined and interacting in often changing ways. It's fun to try and also fun to try to convince others. Medievalists, arise. You have nothing to lose but an old name, which survives through inertia. There are more than three steps between ancient – middle – modern, even in European history – let alone around the world. Try a different name to shake the stereotypes. And tell the lawyers too.

¹ P.J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (2007) and P.J. Corfield, *POST-Medievalism/ Modernity/ Postmodernity? Rethinking History*, Vol. 14/3 (Sept. 2010), pp. 379-404; also available on publishers' website Taylor & Francis www.tandfonline.com; and personal website www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk.

² M. Montanari, *The Culture of Food* (transl. C. Ipsen (Oxford, 1994), p. xii.