

Review - Theorising Medieval Geopolitics

Written by Andrew Linklater

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ANDREW LINKLATER, JUN 27 2012

Theorising Medieval Geopolitics: War and World Order in the Age of the Crusades
by Andrew A. Latham
Abingdon: Routledge 2012

The medieval era remains largely neglected in International Relations – there has been no major study of that period. It is often regarded as little more than a backdrop to the modern states-system, as having little more than ‘historical interest’, and as radically different from the contemporary international order with its distinctive basis in the idea of the sovereign equality of states.

As Latham argues in the opening chapter of this book, several scholars have approached the Middle Ages in an attempt to demonstrate the superiority of a specific theoretical perspective. Neo-realists such as Fischer have found evidence for the contention that the same forces govern anarchical systems in all historical periods. Constructivist critics such as Hall and Kratochwil pointed to the neo-realist failure to recognise the cultural definition of supposedly pre-existent state interests. In so doing, they built on Ruggie’s critique of Waltz which emphasised that medieval and modern international politics had different organising principles. Historical materialists such as Teschke have maintained that class structures and property relations were the real foundation of distinctive medieval conflicts. Such approaches have done much to awaken interest in the medieval period, but they have not provided the detailed study that Andrew Latham now provides in *Theorising Medieval Geopolitics*.

Latham criticises the existing literature because it has failed to cast much light on the ‘discrete’ period that came into

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existence around 1300 and survived until the 1600s (pps. 3 and 58). A second criticism is that the literature has failed to consider the extent to which the medieval and modern worlds were part of one larger historical process (p. 136). Braudel's notion of the 'longue durée' provides the basis for that argument. The details are developed by analysing key works of medieval political theory in order to identify the medieval origins of the idea of sovereignty (p. 72ff) and to support the judgment that the outlines of a sovereign states-system were already evident in 1300. In opposition to those who assert that there was a 'rupture' between the medieval and modern orders – the Peace of Westphalia was once regarded as the turning-point – Latham argues that the latter extended earlier trends but in distinctive ways. There was, in short, no major rupture between the medieval and the modern states-systems. If there was a break, it occurred around 1300 when a world of interconnected medieval states began to develop.

From then on, a new 'political architecture of organised violence' evolved that provides what Latham believes the dominant IR approaches to the medieval order lack, namely an explanation of the 'historical structure of war' – the political framework in which certain entities were entitled to use force though not necessarily authorised – given just war considerations – to use force exactly as they pleased in the course of dealing with 'structural antagonisms'. The argument is explored in a discussion of two types of war: 'public wars' between states, and the 'religious warfare' of the crusades in which the Church claimed the right to use force against heretics and infidels (see chs. 3-4). In the case of public wars, something close to a 'Lockean anarchy' existed; religious wars more closely approximated a 'Hobbesian anarchy' (p. 92ff).

Latham's book deserves a wide readership. It is the first of its kind to engage with a literature that is probably unfamiliar to most students of international relations. It integrates historical interpretations of medieval politics with reflections on principal theories of international relations, and specifically with constructivist scholarship. It is useful to read the book alongside Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) which is similarly constructivist in orientation and breaks new ground in the study of long-term processes. The two books may reflect a growing trend towards taking a broad historical perspective that is anchored in theoretically-informed empirical research. For that reason alone, *Theorising Medieval Geopolitics* is a welcome addition to the literature. It is a striking exercise in rethinking existing positions on medieval international politics; it provides a model to those that want to break with the 'presentism' of much IR scholarship where the focus is confined to the last few years or decades (pps. 2, 32ff). The outcome has been the neglect of longer-term patterns of development which are interesting in their own right, and also the necessary starting-point for profound and enduring, as opposed to slight and ephemeral, explanation.

The strengths of Latham's book are relatively easily listed; the richness of a discussion that is based on extensive scholarship defies quick summary. The problems are more elusive especially to those who are not specialists in the area such as this reviewer who can nevertheless raise certain questions about the cogency of the argument and identify what may be principal weaknesses in what is a highly-impressive work that succeeds in demonstrating that the medieval and modern international orders belong to one long pattern of historical development. Five issues are raised in an attempt to promote debate and discussion about this important book.

First, Latham's broadly constructivist orientation raises questions about its relationship with other works in that tradition. Chris Reus-Smit's *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton University Press 1999) is the key reference because it set out a conceptual framework for promoting the constructivist interpretation of different states-systems. Reus-Smit did not discuss the medieval order, but the question arises of whether his analysis of constitutional structures can be used to develop insights into the medieval period. In short, the present study does not do as much as it could to contribute to constructivist theory in general – to strengthening the conceptual framework that has been developed over approximately the last fifteen years. For all its strengths as a constructivist exploration of the medieval order, the book does not show how the best from different constructivist writings can be brought together in a higher synthesis that can be used in future empirical studies that may promote further innovations in constructivist theory.

Second, *Theorising Medieval Geopolitics* contains important criticisms of existing neo-realist and historical materialist approaches to its field of investigation, but it pays no attention to English School analyses of the sociology of states-systems, and specifically to Martin Wight's *Systems of States* (Leicester University Press, 1977). Two

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essays in that volume (on the 'chronological' and 'geographical origins' of the modern states-system) are especially relevant because they raised large questions about the relationship between the medieval and modern systems, and because they were part of a larger project of understanding anarchical societies as well as reflecting on the appropriate conceptual framework for such an inquiry. *Theorising Medieval Geopolitics* does not engage with that literature in detail. The result is the strange perpetuation of unhelpful divisions between constructivist and English School lines of investigation. Potentials for promoting higher level synthesis not only with constructivism but within IR are not considered.

A third and related issue is how to characterise the long-term patterns of development that suggest that various medieval and modern dynamics should be regarded as part of one overall process. Certain common features are identified, namely the state monopolisation of the control and ownership of the instruments of physical coercion and of the right of taxation (p. 78ff). Also noted are struggles that led to the elimination of some political entities as those monopoly powers became concentrated in a smaller number of hands – in what would come to be known as the great powers (p. 92ff). As English School authors have argued, those contests were not the core features of an unregulated Hobbesian order. Grotian or Lockean restraints on power struggles existed in both the medieval and modern phases in an overall process of development that extended over at least eight hundred years. As Wight argued, it is important to understand the restraining force of medieval constitutionalism on the struggles for power and security in the Middle Ages and in the modern states-system. Along with monopolisation processes and 'elimination contests', the constitutionalist idea was used to restrain such power struggles by building what English School analysts call international society or the society of states. Their inquiries into the 'medieval origins' of European international society, into its relations with neighbouring regions over several centuries, and into its more recent global expansion provide insights into the long process of development encompassing the 'medieval' and 'modern periods'.

A fourth question revolves around the issue of the relationship between political theory and practice. Latham notes that central dimensions of his argument are likely to 'raise eyebrows' (p.135). In particular, the idea that the modern states-system is linked with the medieval order in one long process may arouse the suspicion that historical material is used selectively to prove a point. Latham is well aware of the problems here (see the discussion on p. 26ff) but his own argument does appear to contain some significant gaps. This is most apparent in the sections that explore medieval ideas about sovereignty and show, with important qualifications, that many of the themes that are now associated with Hobbes and Bodin had been formulated – though perhaps not in the same systematic manner – several centuries earlier (see p. 134).

Latham is persuasive on that point which is critical to his argument that the outlines of a world of sovereign states were in place around 1300. What is not explained is how far those ideas influenced political practice, and how exactly the core principles became embedded in institutions and prevailed over competing orientations to society and politics. *Theorising Medieval Geopolitics* cannot be criticised for failing to explain how those processes evolved in all the relevant societies. Perhaps no single work could do that – unless it was an attempt to synthesise the findings of several country-specific studies. But the problem remains. At times, *Theorising Medieval Geopolitics* suggests that certain developments in medieval political theory reflected significant shifts in political practice. The discussion sheds very interesting light on the medieval antecedents of modern ideas of sovereignty, but it is perhaps less convincing as an account of how actual states behaved, and as explanation of how and why such concepts found expression in political reality.

A fifth observation is linked with the earlier comment about how to characterise the long process of development of which the medieval and modern worlds were part. As argued elsewhere, and as future work will contend, Norbert Elias's analysis of 'the civilizing process' has strong claims in this regard (Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations*, Cambridge University Press, 2011; and *Violence and Civilization in the Western States-Systems*, forthcoming). The inquiry explained state-formation as the outcome of earlier elimination contests between medieval lords; it maintained that with the formation of states, those struggles became part of new international power struggles. In that way, the medieval and modern worlds were part of one larger historical process stretching back to the eleventh century.

But according to Elias, there were – and this remains contested territory – some important changes in attitudes to

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violence, in emotional responses to the question of what was permitted and what was forbidden in the relations between people – particularly between those who belonged to the same society though the realm of international politics was also affected. Leaving aside the question of how much is valid in Elias's account of the civilizing process, the fact remains that it sought to explain very long-term developments in social and political structures and in socio-psychological traits including emotional attitudes to violence. By contrast, *Theorising Medieval Geopolitics* tends to close off such lines of inquiry by arguing (with significant qualifications) that it is possible to examine the political dynamics in the relations between states without delving into the economic and social structure of the societies involved (p. 138ff). But that may be to bar the way to understanding exactly how the 'medieval' and 'modern' international orders were linked in one long-term process of development that would prove to be critical not only for Europeans but for humanity as a whole.

An earlier point is worth restating here, namely that *Theorising Medieval Geopolitics* could have done more to contribute to constructivist theory by, for example, exploring the issue of how to develop 'holistic' as opposed to 'systemic' constructivism. The neglect of emotional attitudes to violence is significant in this context. It reveals a sharp bias towards analysing the structural features of political life without taking account of shifts in the socio-psychological domain. That task requires a close analysis of social and economic structures and their interdependencies with the political architecture.

Not the least of the reasons for welcoming this study, which is a courageous and innovative one by any standard, is that it stimulates large questions about the relationship between the medieval and modern international orders and about how to characterise and explain the main continuities and discontinuities. *Theorising Medieval Geopolitics* is essential reading for those who are interested in the historical development of the modern European state and states-system. It is invaluable for those who wish to understand what is at stake theoretically in attempting to understand the relationship between the 'medieval' and 'modern' eras.

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About the author:

Andrew Linklater was Emeritus Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth University. His most recent book is *The Idea of Civilization and the Making of Global Order*, Bristol University Press, 2021. He has nearly completed a book on symbols in long-term perspective, which will be published posthumously with the help of and contribution by his former student Dr André Saramago.