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Periodization and Sovereignty

How Ideas of Feudalism
and Secularization
Govern the Politics of Time

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Introduction

In the early eighth century, the Northumbrian monk and scholar now known as the Venerable Bede offered his own etymology for the Latin word *tempus*, "time." As usual for him, he considers it in the plural: "Times take their name from 'measure'" (*tempora igitur a "temperamento" nomen accipiunt*).¹ Taken in its various senses, the word "measure" nearly captures the force of *temperamentum*, which derives from the verb *tempero*, "to be moderate, to divide, to regulate." The verb *accipio* ("to take without effort, receive, get, accept") hovers between the active and the passive, and thereby displays the logic of the etymological relation: *tempora* are so called because they *do* moderate, divide, and regulate.² Scholars have tended to attribute this emphasis on temporal regulation to the daily monastic routine of tolling bells and calls to prayer, and in so doing have cordoned it off from its far more ambitious, and effective, historical and political designs. Well attuned to the stakes of time as a regulating principle, Bede later became the first author to use *anno domini* (A.D.) dating in a historical narrative, thereby attaching history, in the form of Christian politics, to the sacred at the point of a division in time.³ This periodization, which is not entirely attributable to Bede of course, continues today to regulate calendars and political life.

In recent decades there has been much attention to the "politics of time," and it has not come untethered from the problematic relation of history with the sacred. Indeed, studies of the politics of time have taken this relation as their conceptual limit, almost always expressed in the form of a divide between a religious Middle Ages and a secular modernity. The arguments center upon historical consciousness and follow along these lines: medieval people subordinated all concepts of time to the movement of salvation history and the inevitability of the Last Judgment, and therefore had no sense of *real*, meaningful historical change; under such circumstances history is already determined, and a "medieval" politics of time is therefore an oxymoron.⁴ These arguments often derive explanatory power from economic models of periodization by aligning a transition from ecclesiastical to secular society with a transition from a medieval, rural, agrarian economy to a modern, urban, commercial economy, most typically expressed as the transition from

feudalism to capitalism.⁵ So commonplace are these ideas that—even though the Middle Ages is well understood to be a constructed category—they have taken on the self-evidentiary status of common sense.

A principal goal of this book is to ask why, in the face of all challenges to teleological and stage-oriented histories, do the monoliths medieval/religious/feudal and modern/secular/capitalist (or “developed”) survive, and what purposes do they serve? What does the regulating principle of medieval/modern periodization hold in place, and what does it help to obscure? What political assumptions go unchallenged when subjugation and lawlessness are labeled “feudal” and aligned with the Middle Ages? What cultural paradigms flourish when a Christian politics of time such as Bede’s is declared apolitical, or pre-political? A sincere engagement with these issues requires that the division medieval/modern be put into question together with categories such as “feudal” and “secular,” with which it was mutually constituted, and which it holds in place.

Ironically, the boldest, most celebrated critiques of rigid historical paradigms usually reinforce rather than disrupt this periodization. In his justly famous critique of anthropology in *Time and the Other*, for example, Johannes Fabian sets out this claim, with which few would now disagree: “If it is true that Time belongs to the political economy of relations between individuals, classes, and nations, then the construction of anthropology’s object through temporal concepts and devices is a political act; there is a ‘Politics of Time.’”⁶ Fabian finds it necessary, however, to stipulate that the study of such politics must begin by recognizing a “qualitative step from medieval to modern time conceptions,” which resulted from the “achieved secularization of Time.”⁷ Although he is aware that there are other ways to consider this history, he describes what he calls the “sacred vs. secular” divide in sharp terms: “Enlightenment thought marks a break with an essentially medieval, Christian (or Judeo-Christian) vision of Time. That break was from a conception of time/space in terms of a history of salvation to one that ultimately resulted in the secularization of Time as natural history.”⁸ Thus, even though he insists that “Time belongs to the political economy of relations,” Fabian posits a foundational, qualitative break in the nature of time that is apparently outside politics. Rather than considering the narrative of “secularized time” as political, as part of a process that, like anthropology, “at once constitutes and demotes its objects,”⁹ Fabian considers it simply “achieved.” Like Bede, he thereby grounds a political order by attaching it to a relation with the sacred, at the point of a division in time. The fact that this attachment to a relation with the sacred takes the form of a claim to detachment does not alter this fundamental similarity.

By definition, a division in time purportedly outside politics and based on a relation with the sacred both defines and regulates politics. One obvious symptom of the regulative function of such division is the recent substitution of C.E. (“common era”) for the nomenclature A.D.—a change that does little to diminish the effect of a globalized Christian calendar, and in fact privileges its order under a rubric that appears both secular and universal. As such, it miniaturizes the processes studied by Tomoko Masuzawa in *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Masuzawa’s work clarifies what is at stake in a claim for the Enlightenment’s “achieved secularization of Time.” As Europe produced its own narrative of secularization, she shows, it simultaneously mapped regions elsewhere in the world according to newly consolidated conceptions of “religion” and religious heritage. With this pattern in mind, I want to call attention to the striking correspondence between Fabian’s temporal mapping of European politics according to a “sacred vs. secular” divide, and the geopolitical mapping studied by Masuzawa. In her terms: “One of the most consequential effects of this discourse [of world religions] is that it spiritualizes what are material practices and turns them into expressions of something timeless and suprahistorical, which is to say, it depoliticizes them.”¹⁰ This depoliticization must be studied, I suggest, in tandem with its temporal correlate: the constitution of a “religious,” pre-political “Middle Ages.” The sleight of hand that facilitates the privileged universalism under which *only* “European” politics can identify as “secular,” and only “secular” politics can be legitimate, is medieval/modern periodization. By periodization I mean not simply the drawing of an arbitrary line through time, but a complex process of conceptualizing categories, which are posited as homogeneous and retroactively validated by the designation of a period divide.

The grounding of political order upon periodization is the main concern of this book. The sacred/secular divide presupposed by Fabian has long been a commonplace of European history; yet in world politics today and in recent theoretical debate the categories it presupposes generate violence and contention. Likewise, the period concept of the “feudal” Middle Ages adjudicates conceptions of economic as well as political development, and ever more frequently acts as a foil for “democracy.”¹¹

The problem, which has been obvious for decades, is that units such as sacred-medieval-feudal and secular-modern-capitalist (or democratic) exercise exclusionary force, and require alignment with historically particular cultural, economic, and institutional forms for entrance into an ostensibly global political modernity. Taking up related concerns, medievalists have demonstrated how divisions such as medieval/modern or

Middle Ages/Renaissance impose homogeneities that not only mask the existence of “modern” characteristics in the Middle Ages and “medieval” characteristics in modernity, but also distort the histories of fields such as medicine and philosophy and occlude minority histories such as those of women and the racially or religiously oppressed.¹² Subaltern studies scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty, a longtime opponent of the conceptual divisions constituted by such periodization, characterizes the problem through questions that highlight the overlapping concerns of both medievalists and postcolonial critics: “Can the designation of something or some group as *non-* or *premodern* ever be anything but a gesture of the powerful?” How do we characterize those “whose life practices constantly challenge our ‘modern’ distinctions between the secular and the sacred, between the feudal and the capitalist, between the nonrational and the rational?”¹³

These questions address political struggles and disparities today—particularly those pertaining to religious violence—but I argue in this book that they cannot be separated from the processes that have constituted the idea of the Middle Ages and its categories. No attempt to grapple with these political dilemmas can afford to ignore the function of medieval/modern periodization as a regulating principle and thereby remain open to the dissimulation of readings such as Fabian’s, which postulate historical breaks as fully “achieved” and outside politics. Instead of perceiving that the narrative of “secularized time” simultaneously produced an “other” time and an “Other” of anthropology, Fabian’s argument, like many similar and important critiques of “modern” sciences, reinscribes one of colonialism’s most cherished stories. The conceptual boundaries constituted by this intellectual history “temper” current theoretical efforts to deal with some of the most intractable political challenges, and indeed bear some responsibility for that intractability. My concern in this book is not to revise definitions of the “medieval” or the “modern,” but to address the occlusions and reifications instantiated by the periodizing operation itself, and to show why this matters today. At least two histories of periodization are implicated here: one that generates and protects cultural and political categories by grounding them upon a division between medieval and modern; and one that grounded Christian political order by attaching it, by way of the *anno domini* and the biblical supersession of the New Testament over the Old Testament (which is also to say Christian history over Jewish history), to a division in sacred time. The latter of these is encrypted and redoubled within the former.¹⁴

This book aims to engage the topic of periodization at the level of its global import. Certainly this topic is a vast one, but I do not want to back away from its vastness too quickly, for it is precisely through the slippage

from local history to universal category, from singular event to narrative fulcrum, that the effects of periodization are dissimulated and thus entrenched. The belief in a break between a medieval and a modern (or an early modern) period ever more intensively assumes world-historical implications for categories such as the sovereign state and secular politics—that is, categories with both ideological and territorial stakes—and for exactly this reason the “Middle Ages,” like “modernity” before it, has been vaulted from a European category to a global category of time. This globalized Middle Ages operates in two conflicting ways. On the one hand, literary and political history—whether of Europe, Asia, India, or Africa—is increasingly organized along a conventional medieval/(early) modern divide. According to this scenario, the world moves in unison, in tempo with a once European story written at the height of, and in tandem with, colonialism, nationalism, imperialism, and orientalism.¹⁵ On the other hand, the “Middle Ages” is a mobile category, applicable at any time to any society that has not “yet” achieved modernity or, worse, has become retrograde. In this mode, it provides a template for what Fabian has aptly termed the “denial of coevalness.”¹⁶

Insofar as it has been adopted as a historiographical tactic, even if as a gesture of inclusion, this globalized Middle Ages must be considered in the context of what Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd have perceived as the tendency, under the pressure of contemporary neocolonial capitalism, “to assume a homogenization of global culture that radically reduces possibilities for the creation of alternatives.”¹⁷ By providing a singular point of departure, a global “medieval” past anchors this homogenization of cultural forms.¹⁸ More specifically, this singularized point of departure validates the global application of narrowly conceived definitions of political forms—such as modern democracy, feudal (or “rogue”) states, and “secular” government—the limits of which have been formulated through the periodization of the medieval and the modern. It is important to emphasize that this periodization also requires a singularized Middle Ages: as soon as we begin to pluralize the “medieval” in any meaningful way, we begin to undermine the condition of possibility of the periodizing operation. The topic of multiple temporalities cannot be usefully broached, I suggest, until the process and the effects of periodization have been taken into account. Periodization as I address it, then, does not refer to a mere back-description that divides history into segments, but to a fundamental political technique—a way to moderate, divide, and regulate—always rendering its services *now*.¹⁹ In an important sense, we cannot periodize the past.

For this reason, the pertinent question regarding periodization is not “When was the Middle Ages?” but “Where is the Now?”—a question raised by Chakrabarty as a challenge to scholarship that presupposes a

"certain figure of the now" in its approach to current political dilemmas.²⁰ He argues that the insufficiently examined historicity of fundamental concepts—such as religion, secularism, democracy, and even politics—renders the logic of many events across the world unrecognizable to dominant strains of critical theory, which adopts an unspoken limit as to how "the now" can be thought.

The history of these fundamental concepts is also the history of medieval/modern periodization, consideration of which is essential to any rethinking of critical theory and its limits. Despite the obvious status of the "Middle Ages" as a constructed category, and despite some recognition of its vexed position in the histories of colonialism and competing nationalisms, the relationship between the historical conceptualization of its defining attributes and the formation of some of our most basic historical and political assumptions has not been studied. This book undertakes such study by focusing on two ideas with long and complex histories: feudalism and secularization. These ideas, both notorious in their resistance to definition, anchor "the Middle Ages" as a period concept and supply the narrative bases of the "modern" sovereign state and secular politics. The problem of their definition cannot be extricated from the continuing performance of the periodizing operations that constitute them.

Feudalism and Secularization

My arguments regarding these two complex ideas pertain to a single thesis: *the history of periodization is juridical, and it advances through struggles over the definition and location of sovereignty*. I began this book with the intention of researching feudalism and secularization as concepts, hoping to learn how and why they became such powerful temporal categories. It was a surprise to find that the idea of a "feudal" past for Europe emerged in legal battles over sovereignty, and that the sixteenth-century legists who narrativized the fief not only embraced "feudal law" as the conceptual basis of sovereignty and a social contract, but also competed over its origin story. When this history turned my attention to current theoretical work on sovereignty, it was likewise a surprise to find secularization already there, at the heart of current critical debates over sovereignty and its relationship to law and politics. Before I had the chance to approach it separately, then, secularization appeared in relation to feudalism through sovereignty, and it quickly became evident that the relation of secularization and sovereignty is also key to historical debates over periodization—particularly with respect to the idea of "modernity" as an independent, self-constituting period. Coming full circle, theories

of modernity rely upon the legitimacy of secularization to shore up the period divide.

FEUDALISM

So entrenched is the idea of "feudalism" that the few scholars who have attended to early feudal historiography have celebrated its "discovery" of Europe's legal past, thus leaving its details understudied and its claims unexamined.²¹ Chapters one and two undertake this study and this examination, with attention to the performance of this historiography in struggles, from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, over the definition and the possession of sovereignty. As an "-ism," feudalism of course suggests a fully reified object, a status that accords with the belief that it is (or *ought* to be) a phenomenon of the past. We should not be surprised, however, to find that "feudalism" emerged with the decapitating stroke: first nominalized as *féodalité* on the eve of the French Revolution, it was brought to adjudicate between nobility, parliament, and crown, particularly in matters of property, and ultimately to embody the superstitious and fettered past being dragged to the guillotine.²² In this sense, "feudalism" is one of our most graphic examples of Walter Benjamin's insight that "modernity" simultaneously produced and destroyed the images of tradition to which it opposed itself.²³

My concern in the chapters on feudal historiography is not primarily with the appropriateness of "feudalism" as a descriptive category for the Middle Ages, an issue with a long, controversial history that has lately been revisited, with productive results, by Susan Reynolds. I agree with Reynolds that the idea of a feudal Middle Ages and the wide range of assumptions that this idea brings with it have led to reductive, generalized, and misleading historical and social analysis.²⁴ There simply never was a "feudal Middle Ages." My main concern here, however, is with the relationship between the historiographical *becoming-feudal* of the centuries now considered "medieval" and the formation of political concepts long considered central to modern politics. Well before it materialized as an -ism, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing of a "feudal" past for Europe mediated the theorization of sovereignty and subjection at crucial moments of empire, slavery, and colonialism.²⁵

Chapter 1 traces the early narrative of a feudal European past, which took shape through a search by sixteenth-century jurists for Europe's legal origins, the stakes of which, according to their own arguments, were the nature of sovereignty and the history of *imperium*. For these scholars, feudal law was a way of negotiating the sovereign paradox, as it has been most forcefully described by Carl Schmitt: the sovereign is both inside and outside the law.²⁶ Through a study of the most important of

their legal commentaries, I show that the juridical condensation of a feudal past for Europe both grounded arguments regarding the “free” political subject and a social contract and facilitated the transference of the problem of slavery from the contemporary slave trade to a brutal past. Early feudal historiography fully relies on medieval law and commentary, yet it also constitutes the narrative and conceptual basis of modern politics. The cut of periodization not only obscures this history, but also redistributes its terms—the subjected and the sovereign, the enslaved and the free—across the medieval/modern divide. This chapter therefore advances our understanding of the medievalism at the heart of the theoretical enterprise of modernity, a topic recently explored in other ways by medievalists such as Bruce Holsinger, Carolyn Dinshaw, John Ganim, Allen Frantzen, D. Vance Smith, and Andrew Cole.²⁷ Tracing “the archaeology of medievalism” in modern critical thought provides, as Holsinger puts it, “a powerful mechanism for questioning traditional schemes of periodization and temporality in the Western tradition.”²⁸

It is not quite accurate, however, to speak of “medievalism” with reference to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historiography of feudal law, and this problem indicates the complexity of the temporalities inherent in periodization. To my knowledge, the scholars who narrativized the fief, and who are now credited with “discovering” feudalism, never used the terms “medieval” or “Middle Ages,” and would perhaps have found them perplexing. This is not just a matter of terminology. Although they wrote in a humanist milieu influenced by the linguistic and historical ideals of Petrarch and Lorenzo Valla, and therefore considered the language of earlier legal commentary “barbaric” and its methodology “confused,” these scholars nonetheless identified themselves with these laws and commentaries, which they took as the basis of their own legal arguments. For them, the *ius feudali* they studied was customary law of their *own time*. It is difficult to find in their writings any general terms for the past; they refer to specific laws and specific predecessors, and occasionally to the “ancient past” when discussing what we would today call the “early Middle Ages” or even “late antiquity.” It was only *after* sixteenth-century legists (particularly in France and Germany) theorized sovereignty, subjection, and a social contract on the basis of the feudal relation of lord and vassal, that legal historians such as Jean Bodin advanced arguments for absolutism by retaining this theory of the social contract, but rejecting the “feudal” as property-based and as aligned with slavery. In other words, at the very moment the colonial slave trade began to soar, feudal law and slavery were grouped together and identified as characteristic of Europe’s past and of a non-European present.

Early feudal historiography, then, operated in conflicting modes, one that depended upon and identified with the materiality of a “feudal” past, and one that repudiated material detail as it strove to conceptualize a universal “spirit of the law.” This complex pattern of identification and rejection is what made it possible for the category of the “Middle Ages” to emerge as it did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite the humanist literati following Petrarch (for whom, we should remember, the “dark age” was his own time), the “Middle Ages” as we know it today is not a Renaissance idea. It is a much later reification of categories that emerged as a means of legitimizing sovereignty and conquest.²⁹ By the time thinkers such as Montesquieu, William Blackstone, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx engaged it, for instance, the politically fraught concept of a feudal past had been at work for centuries, and these late analyses owe enormous debts to—and have in turn regenerated—the constitutive work of early feudal historiography. Important as the later, more explicitly “medievalist” discourse is to national, colonial, and imperial politics, it tells us almost nothing about how this periodization occurred, why it is so powerful, or why it is so difficult to establish beginning and end points for “the Middle Ages.”³⁰

Chapter 2 begins by crossing the channel to seventeenth-century England, where legal scholars who were well read in continental feudal historiography recognized its importance to constitutional debates over sovereignty, conquest, and absolutism, and thus soon began to “discover” that England’s past had been “feudal.” The first part of this chapter follows the burgeoning of England’s feudal narrative, which developed as, and in, colonial discourse. Indeed, the acclaimed foundation of English feudal historiography, Henry Spelman’s *Feuds and Tenures*, was written in response to a court decision by which the crown seized colonial property in Ireland, and in which the court had rejected Spelman’s interpretation of feudal history and based its ruling upon that of his contemporary, John Selden. For Spelman and Selden, as for the court system and parliament, feudal law became an invaluable—although always ambivalent and therefore dangerous—discourse on sovereignty and subjection, as well as a potentially lucrative theory of property. Whereas the continental debates over the origin of feudal law had centered on the end of the Roman Empire, English debates pivoted on the Norman Conquest (which for Spelman was “colonial” and subjugating), but they continued to mediate struggles over the location of sovereignty: the *merum imperium*, “sheer power,” or the “power of the sword.”

This chapter section ends with a consideration of recent historiography such as that of J. G. A. Pocock, which, despite its learned and often subtle discussion, erases the performance of the *writing* of a feudal past

by suggesting that scholars such as Spelman “rediscovered” feudalism, which had long been “forgotten” in England. Arguments such as this demonstrate how periodization ultimately becomes reified and one-dimensional. While, as Michel de Certeau has shown, historiography “forgets” infinite possibilities for selecting and arranging detail as it carves out an apprehensible concept, Pocock’s formulation takes the resulting concept and locates it in the past, as the forgotten object toward which historiography must strive. With such confirmation of “modern” historiography’s trajectory, periodization becomes self-evident, and time runs smooth.

Turning to the eighteenth century, the second part of this chapter follows feudal law and its colonial affinities to India. The historiography of English feudal law, including its metamorphosis into *feudalism*, has always been treated as a domestic discourse. However, a wide-angle approach to William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Law* shows that, explicitly following Spelman’s interconnection of feudal law and colonial conquest (i.e., the Norman Conquest but also England’s conquest of Ireland), Blackstone read the history of feudal law through the lens of contemporary colonialism, particularly the battles between the crown and the East India Company regarding the relation of sovereignty, conquest, and commerce. Wanting a *European* past for England—which, according to his admired predecessors, meant a *feudal* past—yet not wanting a past of conquered subjugation to the French, he famously proposed that in England feudal law was a “fiction.” The Normans did impose feudal law, but its terms were *de jure*, not *de facto*: the conquest was a bargain. With this Blackstone triangulates an English feudal past, the current policy of the East India Company in Bengal, and the controversial relation of conquest and commerce. The history of *feudalism*, then, is not to be found in “the Middle Ages,” but in a complex and shifting series of such triangulations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The potential of this triangulation was not lost on colonial administrators, and a decade later East India Company officials such as Philip Francis leaned heavily on Blackstone’s feudal history—including his “feudal fictions”—in writing a revenue plan for the Permanent Settlement of Bengal. The final section of this chapter reads Francis’s plan alongside Ranajit Guha’s analysis of it in his *Rule of Property for Bengal*, and attempts thereby to pry open and to display the difference between an inchoate “feudal” that was not yet an *-ism* for either Blackstone or Francis (for whom it was still being conceptualized at the intersections of colonial and commercial traffic) and the “*feudalism*” that Guha, as a Marxist scholar and the founder of the subaltern studies collective, accepted as the “medieval” past and to a degree as a means of understanding eigh-

teenth-century Bengal (which he describes as “quasi-feudal”). Although Guha was among the earliest to challenge the insertion of colonized countries into narratives of transition (medieval to modern, feudal to capitalist, pre-political to political), he nonetheless accedes to the narrative of medieval/modern periodization for Europe, thus missing the degree to which the very colonial history he studies contributed to that formulation. Well before Marx got hold of it, the space of transition out of a “feudal” past was theorized in relation to the challenges of colonial administration. If we straighten out this timeline, the simultaneous creation and destruction of a paired medieval/colonial is made to disappear.

SECULARIZATION

In contrast to “feudalism,” the closely related problem of “secularization” suggests a process, at minimum the transference or transformation of something from a “nonsecular” to a “secular” status, whether that something is a plot of land, a priest, a government, or an attitude. As an ecclesiastical term since early Christianity, it has referred to the movement from monastic life to that of secular clergy, and as a legal term in European history after the Reformation it refers to the expropriation of ecclesiastical rights and property. In this sense it shares a history with “feudalism,” particularly during the French Revolution’s seizure of both Church property and “feudal rights,” and its process thus moves directionally with the conceptualization of *feudalism*, but away from the structures characterized as feudal.

In a less concise and far more controversial sense, secularization has been understood to narrate the modernization of Europe as it gradually overcame a hierarchized and metaphysically shackled past through a series of political struggles, religious wars, and philosophical upheavals. This is the familiar Enlightenment, “triumphalist” narrative of secularization—for which the privatization of religion, along with the freeing of the European imagination from the stranglehold of Providence, came to mark the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the political qualities designated “modern,” particularly the nation-state and its self-conscious citizen.³¹ It is this narrative that Johannes Fabian invokes, or takes for granted, in the section of *Time and the Other* that I discuss above. Fabian published his influential book in 1983, just before political events began to expose the historicity of this narrative’s qualitative story and to force a reevaluation of “religion” and the “secular.” Talal Asad describes this change of focus in his 2003 *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*:

The contemporary salience of religious movements around the globe, and the torrent of commentary on them by scholars and journalists, have made it plain that religion is by no means disappearing in the modern world. The "resurgence of religion" has been welcomed by many as a means of supplying what they see as a needed moral dimension to secular politics and environmental concerns. It has been regarded by others with alarm as a symptom of growing irrationality and intolerance in everyday life. The question of secularism has emerged as an object of academic argument and of practical dispute. If anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable.³²

With the escalation of bloody political struggles over "secular" or "religious" government around the world, scholarship on these categories continues to expand with little consensus, and I make no attempt here to engage the full compass of this debate.³³ My interest is in the role of medieval/modern periodization in the constitution of the fundamental categories in question, and in ways that taking this periodization into account can make a difference in understanding the contours and implications of the debate.

The historiographical and political processes that yielded the narrative of secularization have been much more studied than those of feudalism, yet—despite the obvious role of periodization in the "triumphalist" narrative of secularization—these studies tend to reaffirm rather than critique the medieval/modern divide. I take Talal Asad's work as an example for the moment, since the relation between the "secular," the "religious," and the "modern" in his *Formations of the Secular* demarcates several issues that engage me throughout this book. Asad offers his complex anthropological study "as a counter to the triumphalist history of the secular," asserting that the "religious" and the "secular" are not essentially fixed categories.³⁴ To the contrary, their definitions and their relation are, at least in part, a function of the juridical. Arguing against the misleading, dichotomized "common assumption that the essence of secularism is the protection of civil freedoms from the tyranny of religious discourse," he suggests instead that institutional powers, in taking aim at a "secular modernity," carve out a sense of "religion" and an opposing sense of the "secular" that is "defined and policed by the law."³⁵ His analyses of juridical processes also demonstrate, as this thesis would suggest, the constant breakdown of West/non-West and modern/premodern binaries.³⁶ They thereby unravel some of the most elemental, constitutive aspects of the "modern" subject.

Like most works that grapple with the volatile politics of these ideas, however, Asad's analysis is pinned to the category of the "modern," even when he would question it. He posits on the one hand that modernity is a *project*, "people aim at 'modernity,'" and he wants to ask "why it has

become hegemonic as a *political goal*, what practical consequences follow from that hegemony, and what social conditions maintain it."³⁷ On the other hand, according to Asad's terms throughout his book, the "secular" is fully circumscribed by the hegemonic project of modernity; it is "a modern doctrine of the world in the world":

We should look, therefore, at *the politics* of national progress—including the politics of secularism—that flow from the multifaceted concept of modernity exemplified by "the West" . . . But should we not also inquire about the politics of the contrary view? What politics are promoted by the notion that the world is *not* divided into modern and nonmodern, into West and non-West? What practical options are opened up or closed by the notion that the world has *no* significant binary features, that it is, on the contrary, divided into overlapping, fragmented cultures, hybrid selves, continuously dissolving and emerging social states? As part of such an understanding I believe we must try to unpack the various assumptions on which secularism—a modern doctrine of the world in the world—is based. For it is precisely the process by which these conceptual binaries are established or subverted that tells us how people live the secular—how they vindicate the essential freedom and responsibility of the sovereign self in opposition to the constraints of that self by religious discourses.³⁸

These are salient questions, and they expose the dilemma wrought by the relation of periodization and sovereignty. Asad is certainly right when he insists that taking a stance on the modern/nonmodern binary is a political move, and this is one of my suppositions throughout this book.

But the way in which the "modern" operates doubly in Asad's passage indicates that, even when questioned, its sovereignty survives complication, a position that does not take into consideration that the "triumphalist history of the secular"—which is also to say the history of medieval/modern periodization—is a principle means by which the idea of the "modern" emerged. If we collapse this relation and thus ignore the means by which periodization binds the "modern" and the "secular," we have already closed off, to use Asad's own terms, the "process by which these conceptual binaries are established." Thus the "secular"—that is, the *world* itself according to this "modern doctrine"—would be already and *only* a "modern" project, in both the temporal and the cultural sense. Asad well recognizes that it is sovereignty, in the form of the liberal humanist "essential freedom and responsibility of the sovereign self" (which he critiques) that is at stake, but frequently in his analysis this also, however inadvertently, becomes a "world" sovereignty already decided. These are some of the issues inhabiting the problem of "secularization" that I take up in Chapters 3 and 4. These chapters, unlike the two chapters on feudalism, focus more on the theo-

retical premises underlying narratives of secularization than on the historical unfolding of these narratives.

In contrast to the “triumphalist” narrative of secularization, a qualitatively different view of the relation between periodization and secularization is available in the work of Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, and some of their contemporaries. Chapter 3 considers the importance of Schmitt’s and Benjamin’s work on sovereignty to the context of recent arguments regarding time, “religion,” and the “secular.” Schmitt’s *Political Theology* (1922) has become central to discussions of sovereignty for its insight into the “sovereign paradox.” The legal order of a state, Schmitt argues, can never be fully self-enclosed; there is always the possibility that a “state of exception,” which he theorizes by analogy to the miracle in theology, might exceed the expectations of all juridical norms. In order to protect its autonomy a state therefore requires a sovereign, whose position it is to *decide* that a state of exception has occurred, and to suspend the existing legal order for the preservation of the state. Schmitt makes it clear that he is dealing with a limit concept. Paradoxically, if a state is to be sovereign in the sense of being “autonomous” (*auto*, “self”; *nomos*, “law”), it must at its core be *antinomic*: it requires a sovereign who is both inside and outside the law, and whose decision, like creation *ex nihilo*, simultaneously defines and breaches the limit of that law. The foundation of this sovereignty, then, is not locatable. One goal of this chapter is to show how medieval/modern periodization frequently serves as a substitute for this absent foundation of sovereignty, and thereby installs certain characteristics of the “modern” in the place of the sovereign. In this sense, periodization functions as sovereign *decision*.

Recent attention to Schmitt has focused on his argument regarding the structure of sovereignty that I outline above, often at the expense of his historical argument. But this structure, epitomized by the famous statement, “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” is pinned to the equally important historical claim: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”³⁹ Here, “secularized” does not refer to the narrative of Europe’s extrication from theological constraints; it refers rather to the transference of theological forms to the politics of an ostensibly “secular” state, in which theology thus becomes immanent. The crucial aspect of modern sovereignty in this sense is its *essential* indebtedness to preceding theological-political forms. Schmitt works out this indebtedness more explicitly in his less studied *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*. Just as sovereignty is irreducible to pure rationality, so too “modern” politics depends upon theological-political precedent for political *representation*:

that is, for a means of incarnating the “ethos of belief” upon which politics depends.⁴⁰

Understood in this way, secularization disrupts any narrative of clean-cut periodization, and blocks the substitution of medieval/modern periodization for the absent foundation of sovereignty. The second part of this chapter engages the critical reception of this “secularization theory,” which was considerably extended by thinkers such as Karl Löwith, and was attacked explicitly as a threat to periodization—most specifically for its suggestion that “modernity,” or *Neuzeit*, is not a fully independent, self-constituting period.⁴¹ The postwar backlash against this view of secularization came at the moment when European political hegemony was waning, decolonization was underway, and “world order” was in question, and this reactionary, vehement insistence upon the purity of medieval/modern periodization, cast mainly in religious/secular terms, must be considered in this broader context. This argument for periodization found powerful expression in the work of Reinhart Koselleck, one of the most influential theorists of temporality and “modernity,” who shifted the emphasis from secularization to that of historical conceptions of time. In Koselleck’s hands, the theory of an eschatologically bound Middle Ages “trapped within a temporal structure that can be understood as static movement,” and entirely lacking any meaningful sense of temporality or historicity, reaches an extreme.⁴² For him, as I show in an extended reading of an essay from his *Futures Past*, time remained untemporalized until the events of modern politics, particularly the French Revolution, cracked open this temporal stasis and inaugurated a meaningful sense of futurity. This narrative, other versions of which I will examine below, bases the periodization of historical time upon the apprehension of historical time itself, taking as its ground an evacuated “Middle Ages.”⁴³

Viewed from within the self-defining “modern European” political discourse in which Koselleck is situated, this narrative could make sense. But it cannot be separated from the interrelated discourses of anthropology and Orientalism that it extends, and in effect shores up, as northern Europe’s (particularly Germany’s) place in “world order” shifted. Anthropology and Orientalism of course generated timeless, suprahistorical, depoliticized tribal and Eastern others in the context of colonialism and imperialism. And, for “self-consciously modern Europeans,” as Masuzawa puts it, these discourses “promoted and bolstered the presumption that this thing called ‘religion’ still held sway over all those who were unlike them: non-Europeans, Europeans of the premodern past, and among their own contemporary neighbors, the uncivilized and uneducated bucolic populace as well as the superstitious urban poor.”⁴⁴ This is the context in which we should consider mid-twentieth-century

efforts to buttress a divide between modern historical consciousness and a theologically entrapped Middle Ages incapable of history, and to disavow the intellectual basis of its own thinking about history, temporality, and periodization.

Theories of periodization and temporality in “the Middle Ages” were more numerous, complex, and embattled than medieval/modern periodization, partly because hegemony was less consolidated, but also, of course, because “the Middle Ages” is not a temporal or geographical unity. Chapter 4 centers on one example, that of Bede, with whom I began this introduction, and juxtaposes two of his texts with an unlikely companion piece: Amitav Ghosh’s postcolonial text *In an Antique Land*. The contemplations of temporal division in these texts touch upon, for different reasons and in disparate ways, the possibilities inherent in resisting or *suspending* periodization. Because it moves around the edges of such potential, this chapter, unlike the previous chapters, is more meditation than argument.

I choose Bede in part because he was an extremely influential historian and theorist of temporality, and in part because his political and historical situation differed significantly from that of Augustine, whose important work on time in *The Confessions* and *The City of God* often overshadows other “medieval” conceptions of time. Augustine had little need to theorize a place and time for Christian kingship and political history, but in eighth-century Britain the very existence of the Church was precarious, and in Bede’s estimation it required active kings as much, sometimes more, than monks and monasteries. For this reason it is no accident that Bede became the first author to use *anno domini* dating in a political and institutional history, and thus to link—in a way that Augustine does not—the incarnation with political time. Bede elaborated what we could call a secular theology of time, whereby the necessary, ongoing calculation of time becomes a regulating practice, a way of living that in turn generates the history of the world. Perhaps more important, Bede’s claims regarding conceptions of history and temporality, like the claims of those who disagreed with him, must be understood as political arguments. As such, they demonstrate the absurdity of the idea of a *single* “medieval” conception of history and temporality; they testify, rather, to a *plural* “Middle Ages,” which—in this as in many other categories—undermines the very condition of possibility of medieval/modern periodization.

Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*, a book familiar to many medievalists for its extensive work on the Cairo Geniza, both critiques and falls prey to periodization. The two main strands of Ghosh’s book—the Indian narrator’s anthropological quest among rural Egyptian villagers, and his reconstructed story of a twelfth-century Jewish trader and his

Indian slave—are linked by a narrative of historical methodologies: the colonial process of making and effacing a void at the center of history, and the counterprocess of squeezing an alternate history out of the colonial archive. Ghosh attempts to stitch the occluded, “medieval” intercultural affiliations that he finds in the twelfth century to the tenuous connections and interfaith practices of his twentieth-century characters as a way, he seems to suggest, of opening alternate historical trajectories. Medievalism becomes the method for countering a colonial politics of knowledge precisely because this politics instantiates the medieval/modern divide as a form of territorialization. All too often this medievalism slips into romantic tropes, and its engagement with periodization sometimes reinstates symptoms of identity politics. Despite its narrative failings, however, *In an Antique Land* accentuates the strictures and the limits of periodization, and tries to think about how time and politics might be disaggregated. By juxtaposing this text with Bede’s, I hope to survey potential contours of such disaggregation.

Historiography

The relationship of literary and historical periodization has its basis in politics, and medievalists have begun to analyze this relation in political terms. A recent book that directly engages the conjunction between political jurisdiction and literary periodization is James Simpson’s *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, which aptly describes the stakes involved. Here is his first paragraph: “Despite its size, this book has a very simple, central, and consistent theme: that the institutional simplifications and centralizations of the sixteenth century provoked correlative simplifications and narrowings in literature. If literary history and criticism is, as I believe it should be, ancillary to the complex history of freedoms, then this is a narrative of diminishing liberties.”⁴⁵ As these two sentences suggest, Simpson understands periodization as politically driven and as having political implications relevant today. His argument that “only new concentrations of political power enable such powerful redrawings of the periodic map” identifies, I believe, the generative mechanism of the periods that have been ingrained by several centuries of intellectual history, and accurately assesses sixteenth-century politics (rather than fourteenth- or fifteenth-century humanism) as critical to medieval/early modern periodization in its predominant form.⁴⁶

In its insistence upon the importance of sixteenth-century centralization, Simpson’s approach coincides with Michel de Certeau’s description of the relation of *place*, politics, and historiography, and a comparison of these two very different authors can be instructive. Certeau argues that: “In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by being

established spatially and by being distinguished by virtue of an autonomous will, political power also occasions restriction of thought." The result, Certeau suggests, is a discourse that, on the one hand, "'legitimizes' the force that power exerts," providing it with a familial, political, or moral genealogy, and on the other hand, "sketches a science of the practices of power."⁴⁷ Simpson's book, in part, traces such practices of power, and, more implicitly than explicitly, their legitimizing role as Henry VIII, for instance, repudiates an "old" ecclesiastical and juridical order, which he simultaneously repossesses and defines.

Because Certeau and Simpson approach historiography from quite disparate positions, and yet for conflicting reasons both reaffirm the periodizing cut they analyze, a brief examination of their differing assumptions and conclusions can help to expose the logic of periodization as well as its inherent slippage. Certeau considers the historiographical method he describes not to have been possible before the sixteenth century, and his argument aligns sovereignty with the conceptualization of historical time: "Since the sixteenth century—or, to take up clearly marked signs, since Machiavelli and Guichardin—historiography has ceased to be the representation of a providential time, that is, of a history decided by an inaccessible Subject who can be deciphered only in the signs that he gives of his wishes. Historiography takes the position of the subject of action—of the prince, whose objective is to 'make history.'"⁴⁸ This argument recapitulates the fundamental premise of the longstanding, triumphalist narrative of secularization. Wrested from God and claimed for the "world," time only becomes truly historical through a political-theological tear that inaugurates a new "age"—a tear that thereby defines the relation of world and time, and that paradoxically occupies a transcendent position by virtue of banishing transcendence. In this way, periodization becomes its own logic, a self-identity that, through rupture rather than through presence, supplies the necessary platform for a claim to sovereignty. This is the disappearing trick that has made the hegemony of the "modern" so difficult to assail. In this evacuation of "history" from the Middle Ages, it is also the temporal version of colonialism's "people without a history."

Even though Certeau recognizes the periodizing "*decision to become different*" as one of encryption and forgetting, one that "promotes a selection between what can be *understood* and what must be *forgotten* in order to obtain the representation of a present intelligibility," he nonetheless bases his own analysis upon an essential break in the conception of history itself, thus reaffirming the self-substantiating logic of periodization.⁴⁹ Crucially, the slippage in Certeau's argument occurs *within* the founding cut of *decision* (Lat. *decidere*, "to cut off"), which for Certeau on the one hand marks the movement of *decision* from Providential to

human control, and on the other hand marks the originary historical "*decision to become different*," within "modern" history. The fact that Certeau critiques the hegemonic operations of "Western modernity" does not undo this affirmation of its claims—or in his own terms, its *forgetting*.

Certeau is heavily influenced, of course, by the work of Michel Foucault, to whom the relationship between periodization and sovereignty was of fundamental importance. Foucault's persistent efforts to disrupt the narrative of a universal sovereign subject generated some of the most effective critique—but also some of the most frustrating repetition—of dominant historiography, a pattern endemic to the paradoxical structure of periodization itself. Foucault's historical analysis often reinstates versions of spatio-temporality established through struggles over history and the possession of sovereignty, mediated by contests over national boundaries and expanding colonial opportunity.⁵⁰ It is no coincidence, therefore, that scholars find Foucault both to repeat stereotypes of periodization and to elide the racial formations of colonialism.⁵¹ Foucault's complex engagement with periodization is a voluminous topic that has recently been taken up by medievalists, and I do not attempt to engage it here.⁵²

Although he does not engage the theoretical questions that occupy Certeau, Simpson moves directly in on the assumptions supporting such a model of historical time, and precisely reverses their terms. In his redescription, "medieval" cultural practice exhibits a sensitivity and openness to historicity, and, "above all, an affirmation of the possibility of human initiative, whether in politics or theology." By contrast, the sixteenth-century "cultural revolution" repudiates historicity as it insists upon a static, original purity, and stresses "central intelligence and initiative" under the mantle of "a newly conceived transcendence of power."⁵³ At the very least, the erudition with which Simpson documents this reversal animates Bruno Latour's famous aphorism that "it is the sorting out that makes the times, not the times that make the sorting."⁵⁴ There is perhaps some strategic irony in Simpson's clean reversal and his assertion that "there *was* such a thing as the Middle Ages and a 'Renaissance,'" a position that allows for a decisive, massive overturning of historical assumptions—on their own terms.⁵⁵ Such declarations jostle throughout the book with demonstrations of how the periodizing *coup* failed, was incomplete, or was so dispersed and inconsistent as not to constitute a division at all.

Periodization has not yielded absolute or unassailable configurations of time and power. Declarations of jurisdiction over time, space, and history in the sixteenth century did not utterly succeed as *performative* acts, any more than did those of following centuries.⁵⁶ Certainly they were epochal *in their own terms* of pronouncing a revolutionary moment

in law, which enacted institutional and, less directly, cultural change. To the degree that such change was constituted and executed *as* a break with a past simultaneously defined, this act of periodization instantiates certain limits. But, as David Wallace remarks with reference to the Reformation, “the transformative effects” of such shifts “can never be as comprehensive as their agents, and their agents’ chroniclers, would have us believe.”⁵⁷ The extent to which we grant an existential status to such periodization by *fiat* depends not only upon our willingness to read *with* dominant historiography and its organization of categories, and to comply with the selection and description of texts and events according to the strictures of “modern” intellectual history, but also to cooperate in the slippage between institutionalized limits and historical essence.⁵⁸ In other words, it requires us retrospectively to collapse the difference between history and a theory of history, and thus to reify the basis of what is always a *particular* sovereign claim upon “the now.”

The most potent critique of this historicism, particularly its mapping of homogenized historical time as a mechanism of epistemological exclusion, has come in recent decades from the arena of postcolonial studies. For this reason, a rich conversation has been developing between medieval and postcolonial studies, and one aim of this book is to bring the history of the relation between medieval/modern periodization and techniques of colonialism (even as they continue today) into sharper focus.⁵⁹ As medievalists have recently argued, the genealogies of “the Middle Ages” and of colonialism are intimately entwined. The construction of a “medieval” period characterized by irrational superstition was fully involved with the identification of colonial subjects as irrational and superstitious, and this process bore concrete effects upon colonized peoples through the systems of rule that it generated and legitimized. The idea of a superstitious Middle Ages, in other words, did not preexist the “superstitious” colonial subject upon which it became mapped; rather, they emerged together, each simultaneously making possible and verifying the other. Likewise, the analysis of land systems in colonies went hand in hand with the development of the concept of a “feudal” Middle Ages, and this analysis played out in administrative decisions regarding the organization and control of land for the purpose of extracting wealth, even as it concretized a feudal medieval past. There was no such “superstitious, feudal Middle Ages” *before* colonialism, and doubtless there never would have been such without colonialism; vice versa, colonizers could not have mapped and administered foreign lands and bodies as they did without the simultaneous process of imagining such a “Middle Ages.” This argument does not receive its own chapter here, but I hope the reader finds it interwoven, both explicitly and implicitly, throughout these pages.

Part I Feudalism

changed the world political terrain that response on all sides must come—and ever more intensively does come—in the language of “religion.”

The political currency of feudalism and secularization returns us to the question “Where is the Now?” which, I have suggested, is the appropriate question to be asked about medieval/modern periodization. The assumption that “the Middle Ages” actually existed as a meaningful entity, and that it was “religious” and “feudal,” bulwarks the persistent determination to ignore the historicity of fundamental political categories. The problem with the “grand narrative” of the West is not simply one of linearity and the myth of “progress.” More crucially, it is a problem of the formation of concepts in conjunction with periodization, a process that retroactively reifies categories and erases their histories. If the future is to be open, rather than already determined, then periodization must come undone.

Notes

Introduction

1. Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Charles W. Jones, 274. Tr. Faith Wallis, *The Reckoning of Time*, 13. For the distinctiveness of Bede's etymology, see Wallis's note to this passage. According to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, *tempere* derives from *tempus*.

2. For discussion of the history of etymological practice prior to Bede, see the introduction to Isidore's *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, 11.

3. For discussion of Bede and the idea of the *anno domini*, see Deliyannis. In his world chronicle included in *De temporum ratione*, Bede uses *anno mundi* dating, but his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* uses the *anno domini*. The point is not that Bede was the first to conceptualize *anno domini* dating, which had occasionally been used in charters, but rather the importance of its use in a political narrative. Bede relies heavily upon divisions of time for his arguments about ecclesiastical and political dating, which I discuss at length in Chapter 4.

4. Versions of this argument, which I will examine in more detail below, can be found in Kosseleck, *Futures Past*, Certeau, *The Writing of History*, and Osborne, *The Politics of Time*.

5. One fairly recent foundation for this common argument is that of Jacques Le Goff in his well-known essays “Merchant's Time and Church Time in the Middle Ages” and “Labor Time in the ‘Crisis’ of the Fourteenth Century,” *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, 29–42 and 43–52. Although Le Goff often nuances his argument and warns against exaggeration, he provides a neat template for strict periodization between an ecclesiastical, agrarian, providentially oriented Middle Ages and a secular, commercial, and humanist modern age. His scheme has been taken up as shorthand for validating simple divisions between “medieval” and “modern” conceptions of time.

6. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, xl.

7. Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 11–12.

8. Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 26. At this point in his argument Fabian recognizes but dismisses in a note Kenelm Burridge's argument in *Encountering Aborigines*, and comments that “where I see breaks and discontinuity, he [Burridge] regards the Christian conception of otherness as the main continuous source of anthropological curiosity. This leads him to ascribe a fundamental role to missionary practice as a model for anthropology.”

9. This phrase comes from the description of Fabian's argument by Matti Bunzl, in his foreword to the second edition of *Time and the Other*, x.

10. Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 20. For further, detailed discussion of this process, see Perkins, *Christendom and European Identity: The Legacy of a Grand Narrative Since 1789*; see also Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Debate About Gender, Religion, and Rights.”

11. I discuss the temporal implications of this relationship with “democracy” in the Epilogue to this book.

12. See, for example, Wallace, *Premodern Places* and “Periodizing Women”; Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition*; Davis, “National Writing in the Ninth Century”; Lampert, “Race, Periodicity and the (Neo)Middle Ages”; Fuchs and Baker, “The Postcolonial Past”; Ingham and Warren, *Postcolonial Moves*. A recent special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* on the topic of “Medieval/Renaissance: After Periodization,” ed. Jennifer Summit and David Wallace, offers rich discussions of this topic, although it appeared too late for me to engage them here.

13. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, xix–xx. Chakrabarty has been criticized within postcolonial studies for appearing to suggest that non-Western societies exhibit traces of the past, and for valuing the time of “gods and spirits” in a way that plays into the hands of religious extremism. As I discuss in Chapter 3, both sides of this argument are caught up in binaries instituted through periodization.

14. As Julia Reinhard Lupton notes, this supersessionary structure is one of the “foundational principles of modern periodization per se.” *Afterlives of the Saints*, 23. See also Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary*. I address this issue at length in Chapter 4.

15. We find, for example, both mass-market textbooks and postcolonial novels adopting this organization. See *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, ed. David Damrosch, which divides all world literature into two volumes and six sub-categories: Volume 1: *The Ancient World, The Medieval Era* (fourth through the fourteenth centuries), *The Early Modern Period*; Volume 2: *The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, The Nineteenth Century, and The Twentieth Century*. For the interrelation of medievalism and Orientalism, see Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism*.

16. Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 31.

17. Lowe and Lloyd, *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, 1.

18. This is the case even though a globalized Middle Ages can also, conversely, offer a means of narrating a resistant participation in those forms. For examples of resistant uses of medievalism in colonies and former colonies, see Davis and Altschul, *Medievalisms in the (Post)Colony*.

19. As Le Goff has recently phrased it, periodization is a way of “controlling time,” and of “defining and assigning a date to the construction of a meaningful identity.” See his “Maîtriser le temps,” *Temps et Histoire*, 2 (2004), 19, 20.

20. Chakrabarty, “Where Is the Now?” The question “When Was the Middle Ages?” was the topic of a plenary session of the meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, Toronto, 2007. The main focus of the panel was the assignment of certain dates for the beginning and end of the Middle Ages.

21. See especially Donald R. Kelley, “De Origine Feudorum: The Beginnings of an Historical Problem”; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*. Susan Reynolds has questioned this historiography, and briefly analyzes it in her *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*.

22. As an adjective, “feudal” had been current since at least the tenth century, but it had no corresponding noun. See Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, vol. 1; J. Q. C. Mackrell, *The Attack on “Feudalism” in Eighteenth-Century France*.

23. See especially Benjamin’s “Storyteller,” in *Illuminations*, 89.

24. Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*. See especially her introduction.

25. For discussion of the denomination of “feudalism,” see R. J. Smith, *The*

Gothic Bequest: Medieval Institutions in British Thought, 1688–1863. In France, *féodalité* was coined in the late eighteenth century. See Bloch, *Feudal Society*, vol. 1; Mackrell, *The Attack on “Feudalism” in Eighteenth-Century France*.

26. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 7. I discuss Schmitt at length in Chapter 3.

27. See for instance, Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition*; Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*; Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism*; Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*; Smith, *The Household Imaginary*; Cole, “What Hegel’s Master/Slave Dialectic Really Means.” In her forthcoming *Memory’s Library*, Jennifer Summit discusses the “double effort of rejection and recovery” underlying the formation of early modern libraries in the context of building a new national identity.

28. Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition*, 4, 6.

29. For discussion in a different context of the retrospective writing of a narrative for the “rise of the West” and its relation to periodization, see Janet Abu-Lughod, “On the Remaking of History: How to Reinvent the Past.”

30. Scholars who have tried to approach the history of the concept of the Middle Ages through study of terms such as “medieval” and its Latin and various vernacular cognates have declared surprise at the paucity of information such a study yields. See Robinson, “*Medieval, the Middle Ages*,” Gordon, “*Medium Aevum and the Middle Age*,” as well as Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception of the ‘Dark Ages.’”

31. Typical of this argument, for instance, is Peter Burke’s *The Renaissance Sense of the Past*, and Koselleck’s *Futures Past*, which I discuss at length in chapter 3 below. Other examples of this pervasive tendency are Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought*; Ferguson, *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance*; and Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past: A Study in the Origins of Modern Historical Consciousness*.

32. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, 1.

33. For recent discussion, see, in addition to Asad, Needham and Rajan, eds., *The Crisis of Secularism in India*; De Vries and Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies*; Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics*; Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*.

34. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 25.

35. *Ibid.*, 255.

36. He finds in a self-consciously “modernizing” judicial reform in nineteenth-century Egypt, for instance, the argument for religious disciplinary ritual as the intellectual prerequisite for a moral judge. He proposes a resemblance and perhaps a genealogical tie between this embodied practice and the “concept of *habitus*,” traced through Pierre Bourdieu and Marcel Mauss to medieval Christian discourse and to the Aristotelian tradition that it shared with Islam. These reforms, nonetheless, marked “revolutionary change” in the legal system on behalf of “secularization and modernization.” Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 250–53. For an extended discussion of Bourdieu’s “medievalism” with regard to his theory of *habitus*, see now Holsinger’s *The Premodern Condition*, 94–113.

37. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 13.

38. *Ibid.*, 15–16.

39. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

40. Schmitt, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, 17.

41. However, as I discuss in Chapter 3, Löwith had many fundamental disagreements with Schmitt regarding other issues.

42. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 7.

43. This is an important consideration for Osborne in his *Politics of Time*, which I address in Chapter 3.

44. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 19.
45. Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 1.
46. Ibid., 12. Simpson grants that his focus is almost exclusively English, but, as I argue in Chapters 3 and 4, this political and juridical pattern holds as well for sixteenth-century France, Germany, and Italy, at least.
47. Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 6–7.
48. Ibid., 7.
49. Ibid., 5. See also 15, note 14, where Certeau suggests that the cause of this historiographical difference could be traced back “to the slow transformation of history produced toward the end of the Middle Ages by the emancipation of cities, subjects of power, and the autonomy of jurists, technicians, thinkers, and functionaries of this power,” which does not undo his periodization, but rather integrates it into a narrative context.
50. See especially Foucault’s *Archeology of Knowledge*, which considers the sovereign subject with respect to juridical sovereignty and (“modern”) disciplinary power. As Giorgio Agamben intimates, Foucault resists a unitary theory of power by separating a juridico-institutional model of power from that of a totalizing biopolitics along temporal lines that conceal rather than analyze the nucleus of sovereign power. See *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 4–7.
51. See Bartlett, “Foucault’s ‘Medievalism’”; Lochrie, “Desiring Foucault”; Lees, “Engendering Religious Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England”; Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary*; and Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 200. With regard to Foucault’s elision of colonialism, Ann Laura Stoler remarks that “Foucault’s selective genealogical attention to the dynamics of internal colonialism within Europe by and large positioned the racial formations of Europe’s imperial world outside his epistemic field and off his analytic map,” *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, 91. For further critique of Foucault’s chronologies and their elision of the colonial site of race, see Bhabha, “‘Race,’ Time and the Revision of Modernity,” in *Location of Culture*, especially 247–48.
52. Both Dinshaw and Holsinger deal extensively with the work of Foucault. Dinshaw has traced a “liberatory potential” as well as a disruptive rhetorical strategy in Foucault’s medievalism, which, she finds, uses “conventional historical markers” to critique conventional history, thus allowing him “strategically to clear a space” for his own project of disaggregating identity (*Getting Medieval*, 196–97). In his investigation of medievalism’s centrality to French theory, Holsinger links this strategy in Foucault, along with some of his attitudes toward the juridical subject, to the influence of the medievalism of Georges Bataille, particularly with regard to the latter’s work on sovereignty and sexuality (*The Premodern Condition*, 52–56, and chapter one generally). The pattern found in theorists such as Foucault of both cordoning off and identifying with an alternative “Middle Ages” is a symptom, I suggest, of periodization *already* at work in the structures of sovereignty with which they grapple.
53. Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 558–59.
54. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 76.
55. Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 558, my emphasis.
56. I use “performative” here in the sense of J. L. Austin’s speech act theory in *How to Do Things with Words*, and as extrapolated by theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. See particularly Derrida’s “Signature Event Context” in *Margins of Philosophy*, and Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.
57. Wallace, “Periodizing Women,” 403.

58. The threat of such a counter-reading to the “modern” and to the categories dependent upon its integrity are evident in the shape of resistance to it, discernable, for instance, in works such as Constantin Fasolt’s recent *The Limits of History*, which studies the linkage of history and law in order to prove that “all history is modern [read, “modern European”] history,” and that “histories of the Middle Ages are condemned to oscillate between irreverent incomprehension and reverent idealization—or lose their meaning” (228). Fasolt claims to circumscribe his “history” as “one particular limited and modern form of understanding that is itself a party to the historical proceedings it describes” (223), but this caveat does not mitigate his sorting of evidence in order to argue for an historical break in “history” itself. Read against the grain, work like Fasolt’s is nonetheless instructive for its demonstration of the exclusions upon which an intact modernity relies, and for its slippage between an insistence upon history’s unknowability and, at the same time, an insistence upon the empirical status of “modern” novelty. Fasolt is surely right, however, to consider periodization in terms of political and legal history.

59. Some of the salient works by medievalists addressing this topic are Biddick, *Shock of Medievalism*; the essays in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Cohen; *Postcolonial Moves*, ed. Ingham and Warren; Ingham, *Sovereign Fantasies: Postcolonial Approaches to the Middle Ages*, ed. Kabir and Williams; Lampert, “Race, Periodicity, and the (Neo-) Middle Ages”; Spiegel, *The Past as Text*, and “Epater les Médiévistes”; Holsinger, “Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique”; Wallace, *Premodern Places: Calais to Surinam, Chaucer to Aphra Behn*, as well as his “Carving up Time and the World: Medieval-Renaissance Turf Wars; Historiography and Personal History”; Warren, *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain*. Works by postcolonial theorists that engage the relationship of the Middle Ages and colonialism include Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*; Rabasa, “Franciscans and Dominicans Under the Gaze of a Tlacuilo,” “Without History? Apostasy as a Historical Category,” “Decolonizing Medieval Mexico,” and *Inventing A-M-E-R-I-C-A: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*.

Chapter 1. Sovereign Subjects, Feudal Law, and the Writing of History

1. For discussion of the different uses of the term *imperium* from the time of the Roman Empire through the eighteenth century, see Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France, c. 1500–c.1800*, 14–19 (which also discusses the implications of these uses in a colonial context); Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1; Fuchs, *Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities*. I discuss the issue of *imperium* more fully below. My epigraph from Noam Chomsky comes from “Homi Bhabha Talks with Noam Chomsky,” in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on Edward Said.
2. See Berman, *Law and Revolution II*, especially chapter 3, for discussion of this generation of humanist jurists, which he calls the “second phase” or the “principled stage of humanist legal science.”
3. *Feudalism*, of course, has long moderated debates over the history and development of modes of power, whether these battles rage among medieval historians interested in military, dynastic, and state formations, or among Marxists disputing the history of modes of production. The scholarship is far too vast to document, but as samples of the former one could consider the exchange in *Past and Present* 142 (1994): 6–42; 152 (1996): 196–223; and 155 (1997): 177–95.