Welcome to the New Middle Ages! Network neo-medievalism

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When used colloquially, the phrase "neo-medievalism" is usually associated with disapproval. "This is simply a return to the Middle Ages!" – people say when offended by somebody's intellectual backwardness or exaggerated religiosity. Certain philosophers associate the "new medievalism" with the thought of Nikolai Berdyaev who naively envisioned a world of utopia based on peculiarly understood Christian ideals. In this text I would like to distance myself from both these formulations. Instead, I would like to prove that the "new medievalism" may become, after a certain amount of philosophic treatment, a term that aptly describes the social changes taking place in the 21st century.

In the current issue of our policy papers Grzegorz Lewicki, Research Fellow at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation, analyses the influence that "neo-medievalism" will have on Europe and Poland. "Neo-medieval reality requires Poland to consider two things: mapping network relations and creating a strong and simultaneously open collective identity."

I highly encourage you to read the new issue of the "Pulaski Policy Papers"!

Dominik Jankowski
Chief Editor of the "Pulaski Policy Papers"

Grzegorz Lewicki

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I. The three known medievalisms

In the 20th century the term "new medievalism" or "neo-medievalism" was sometimes used by historiographers, cultural philosophers and even political scientists. The former examined the heritage of the Middle Ages to discover that its picture in our minds had been distorted by the culture of the Enlightenment which branded it as the Dark Ages. By manipulating the discourse over the Middle Ages the Enlightenment reserved positive connotations for itself (progress, dynamics), while downplaying the past (ignorance, stagnation). The said scientists have shown that the Middle Ages was in reality an epoch of progress and constant actualization, and the awareness of insolvability, instability and changeability of the universe were very advanced. Still, a man of the Middle Ages did not succumb to the unknown; on the contrary, he tried to solve or at least domesticate the inconsistencies and spheres of ignorance. This he did not only thanks to a unifying notion of God, but also to scientific and logical reflection.

In turn, neo-medievalism in the sphere of philosophy of culture was popularized by an Italian historian and writer Umberto Eco. He listed the typology of various interpretations of this term, starting from the most superficial, pop culture and naive ones (e.g. fantasy literature where the Middle Ages is portrayed as the epoch of barbarians, a period full of violence and darkness) and ending with those scientific ones (e.g. philological neo-medievalism based on linguistic studies). Eco is not surprised by the return of interest in the Middle Ages. According to him, "all the problems of the western world emerged in the Middle Ages: modern languages, merchant towns, capitalist economy (with its banks, checks and interest rates) are the inventions of the Middle Ages. In this very period the modern army was created, the modern concept of the state, as well as the idea of supranational federation, […] frictions between the rich and poor, the concept of heresy and ideological deviation and even the modern understanding of love as destructive 'miserable happiness'. One may also add the conflict between the state and church, trade unions (but in a corporatist version), the transformation of the labour market through technology" and science, whose development gave us numerous and still applicable innovations (e.g. the compass, glasses, Arabic mathematics). Unlike antiquity, which we admire as a bygone ideal, we still live in the heritage of Middle Ages: "We no longer live in the Parthenon but we still walk and pray in the aisles of cathedrals".

By attempting to compare the early Middle Ages with modern times Eco intends to enlist suggestive similarities. According to him, in order to create "good Middle Ages" one needs to find some entity resembling the late Roman Empire, i.e. "A Great Peace which is falling apart, a great international state authority which once united the world in terms of language, tradition, ideology, religion, art and technology, and which at one point, due to its own uncontrollable complexity, falls down. It falls because "barbarians" press against the borders, who are not necessarily deprived of culture but do bring new customs and new

world visions". The Italian semiotician compares the Roman Pax to the Pax Americana, with the decline of liberalism (and return to patriarchalism) analogous to the slow demise of the Romans and the reproductive triumph of the barbarians in late antiquity. Eco also mentions the modern "new feudalism", i.e. the informal but very real class separation of the upper class from the masses, and describes the medievalisation of cities: huge western metropolises are full of minorities who reject integration and who cultivate clan structure and create isolated districts with their own centers. As a result, cities are undergoing segmentation and fragmentation, which contributes to the creation of a climate of constant and ubiquitous menace; full of immigrants, these cities remain depopulated by its indigenous citizens who after work find shelter in fortified suburbs and gated communities. Today, like in the Middle Ages, society has a sense of all-embracing risk and is conscious of human limitations. This psychological uncertainty is closely linked to our reliance on technology and our belief that state authority is not able to guarantee physical security. Uncertainty has also got an international dimension; wars are not declared anymore, and the armies of the American Empire are spread around the entire world. In this unstable context subcultures and religiously inspired groups become active. They spread their ideals and compete to get general attention; also various nomadic bands of trouble-makers traverse the world. The distinctions between art and technology, between the artist and the artisan, begin to blur; technological novelties once more give rise to the admiration and fascination of crowds.

According to Eco, the medieval metaphor may sometimes be articulated on the basis of symmetrical opposition. For example: in the Middle Ages the falls in population numbers were the result of depopulation and hunger, whereas today the opposite takes place: population surfeit is directly linked to communication and transportation surfeit. The same is true of technological progress: according to Eco, the early Middle Ages is a period of technological stagnation. Whereas today the analogy is reversed: intense technical progress paradoxically causes an impasse and malfunction, and the quickly developing food industry has turned to producing poisonous and carcinogenic food.

Eco also points to the medieval features mentioned by historiographers, i.e. the constant updating of knowledge. Summing up the essay he states that the new medievalism that awaits us is "a permanent transition period" when certain hypotheses that refer to the utilization of chaos need to be worked out, according to the logic of conflictuality. Due to the very same challenges as those which once made a man set up a university, a culture of constant adaptation will emerge. However, Eco warns against excessive optimism expressed towards the coming epoch, and reminds us that the Middle Ages was also characterized by plagues, massacres, intolerance and death.

Still another type of medievalism refers to the transformation of international relations. Hedley Bull, British political scientist, envisages a picture of an international system where the state slowly loses its sovereignty by entering into more and more complicated and overlapping network of interrelations. It is forced to share power with superior subjects (international structure) and those who are inferior (institutions, pressure groups). As a result the state system evolves, and the traditional perception of sovereignty disappears. Bull's neo-medievalism is: (1) integration of countries towards larger organizational units, with the EU being an obvious example here; (2) disintegration of countries which become more and more dependable on external actors; (3) breakdown of state monopoly on using violence, i.e. appearance of private organizations which use violence – non-state groups, private anti-state organizations (e.g. terrorist groups) seeking to take over the existing countries or creating new ones; the existence and development of supranational organizations – multinational corporations, global political movements, international non-government organizations, churches, intra-government organizations (e.g. the World Bank); (5) technological unification of the world, i.e. globalization which unites but also

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divides, favors both global and local integration.

II. The three unknown medievalisms

Neo-medievalism may also be recognized in places where it has never been described before: in the spheres of economy, sociology and philosophy. The first sphere suggests that economy should be subject to ethical discipline. However, this does not mean using the arguments of CSR school (Corporate Social Responsibility), which makes an entrepreneur act ethically, convinced that ethics pays off in the long run. It is more about altruistic arguments – ethical actions are an investment in the community an entrepreneur should develop due to her social role (not because of financial motives). In exchange for investing in society she wins gratitude, devotion, compliance and the long-term honesty of her employees. Today, the occurrence of the new submissiveness is called "new paternalism" by economists, but only in informal conversations, just because of the negative connotations of this term, suggesting the infantilism of an employee. During official speeches they prefer to use the word "distributive justice" which means practically the same but rhetorically is more "democratic". Such a view of economy, more and more popular these days among Christians and Muslims, used to have its counterpart in the Middle Ages when it referred to permanent desires and human conscience – a manufacturer had his rights and duties, and enjoyed similar respect to that enjoyed by artists, but he also bore significant moral responsibility.

Neo-medievalism in sociology I understand as prognosticating or stating directly the return of an outlook open to transcendence or religion. The father of modern sociology, Pitirim Sorokin, maintained that today we are witnessing a deep cultural transformation which will cause there to be a revitalization of the open outlook on intuition, which will in turn bring a return of faith in God and religion as a provider of spiritual certainty. In the same spirit Jose Ortega y Gasset, whose sociological system assumed a periodic reevaluation of mass beliefs, expected that soon a man would appear in Europe with a mental constitution that would permit a supra-rational component, and who would also be free from religious fundamentalism. Whereas Arnold Toynbee, a British philosopher of history, in his twelve-volume Study of History (Studium historii) searched for an analogy between postmodernity and the decline of antiquity and early Middle Ages (cf. Eco's intuition). Although he did not use the word "neo-medievalism", he assumed a rise in social significance of religious groups in Europe. This type of medievalism is well rooted theoretically – statistical research confirms this (e.g. a final report World Value Survey noticing not a decay but redirecting of spiritual needs).

One can also speak about philosophical neo-medievalism which consists in breaking various types of skepticism by the use of rigorous logical thinking and openness to general concepts (universals). Firstly, it is of an epistemological character, i.e. it opposes postmodernism by arguing that the finiteness and incompleteness of human knowledge about the world does not signify that everything can be questioned. Quite the opposite, although the truth has got an aspectual character, regularities in the universe exist, and one may build knowledge on their foundations. Secondly, this form of medievalism has also got an ontological dimension, i.e. it values the most general abstract concepts (e.g. unity, entity, truth), and assumes their actual existence. Medievalists believe that we cannot assume that general concepts do not exist as generalizing is necessary for our orientation in the world. God is the greatest generality, add neo-medievalists who happen to be religious.

III. Synthesis: network neo-medievalism

The elements of medievalism described above comprise the basis for a new theory of

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social changes whose first methodological postulates might be: (1) searching for an analogy between modern times and the Middle Ages. When looking for an analogy for the "late Roman Empire", the European Union comes to mind automatically. In fact the EU displays many characteristics of the social system from that period of time: (i) it guaranteed (together with the U.S.) a large-scale military peace creating "a universal state"; (ii) created a new social class to govern it and (iii) constructed a philosophy of peace and tolerance (political and cultural post-modernism); (iv) absorbed peoples from outside which affected its demographic structure and (v) has become an area of revitalization of various religious movements (mainly Islam and Christianity) which more and more efficiently propagate slogans referring to their exclusion and discrimination, at the same time winning the approval and sympathy of the masses, and seeking influence on public issues.

An influx of various cultures into the mechanism of the universal state and problem of their assimilation will probably end like all the other migrations of peoples (in German Völkerwanderung) from the past, i.e. a slow disappearance of the present European culture for the benefit of some indefinable new quality. The only certain thing is that in the process of change the social groups able to retain a strong internal unity will be rewarded, i.e. the Asians (having a tight clan system in the type of guanxi), Jews (having a mythically rooted idea of a mission and Diaspora), Muslim (thanks to the political institution of Islam) and, perhaps, Christians (thanks to the institutional universality of the Catholic Church).

I am using the term "network" to talk about medievalism in order to point that it requires a totally new language of description which is provided by (2) "sociology of networks", which looks at various phenomena as multi-level cause-and-meaning networks, spread simultaneously on various levels of reality. For example, Poland in its present perspective will not be anymore perceived as a territorially rooted institution in the international system but as an enormous hierarchical network, like the one H. Bull tentatively described. Although the centre of this network is situated on the Polish territory, the tentacles and connections fire away towards the entire world encompassing the Poles all over the globe and catching various countries, institutions and "virtual" entities such as identity (e.g. a citizen, following this comprehension, is a link in the network called Poland, conditioned by individual history, keeping a connection with the "centre" thanks to the sense of national identity produced by the community). Such a network is subject to constant changes on all of its levels, which makes constant mapping of its range and functions necessary. Network medievalism also assumes (3) fluidity, risk, variability, and the need for updating as permanent elements of the social system. Uncertainty has become an every-day occurrence – in the 21st century it is no longer about eliminating the risk but about its curbing and controlling – like in the Middle Ages which rejected faith in the omnipotence of a human being in favour of a minimization of the results of his lack of knowledge. The spirit of the Enlightenment is slowly fading away, and discoveries of exact sciences (such as the Gödel's proof of incompleteness or Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle) depict the impassable structural limits of our knowledge.

The neo-medievalism of networks also points to (4) exponential (more and more accelerating) technical progress which incessantly modifies the circumstances in which an average human being may function. This leads to "the future shock" i.e. a situation where the speed of social changes requires increasingly better adaptation skills and gets dangerously close to the limits of a human's physical capabilities. Like in the Middle Ages, an illiterate was a man who could not write, today an illiterate is someone who cannot learn quickly, instantly forget and then learn again. The dynamic appearance and disappearance of job vacancies not only requires a thorough knowledge about one area but also constant adaptability. In this race numerous people crumpled by corporations already started to miss the paternal system (economic neo-medievalism) that once gave relative security in exchange for unconditional servility.

Along with technical progress, new structures of power emerge (5) which need to be constantly followed and mapped, due to their factual confidentiality. New power is placed around the centres which select information (after the invention of a TV, a new social class emerged around media owners; after the inventing of Internet another structure of power emerged in not more than a few decades (and is centred around creators of the systems which regulate and organize the network – e.g. Google). Today, the superiors of these centres play the role of medieval magnates whom everybody must hold in high esteem. The views of a media baron who does not stand out might have an indefinable but significant influence over the content transmitted by his mass media. As a result the baron can influence awareness of public opinion, i.e. neo-medieval mob (by choosing what and how he informs them).

IV. Conclusions for Poland

Neo-medieval reality requires Poland to consider two things: mapping network relations and creating a strong and simultaneously open collective identity. Mapping, i.e. creating a model of existing decision networks on all levels of political life is especially difficult, as the effectiveness of network relations is inversely proportional to their openness. In other words, authentic decision networks, in contrast to those formal and ostentatious ones, wish to remain confidential by all means. Unfortunately, Poland is not able to map these kinds of processes, and it is not only about the pitiful state of our intelligence, the scandalous lack of Poles in the EU bureaucracy, or the inability to act in the sphere of Brussels' lobbying. Civil service employees admit that the decision coordination fails even at the level of communication between the ministries, which does not leave any illusions on Poland's strength in Europe.

Neo-medievalism also forces the creation of strong identities – social groups, i.e. human networks where common values are strong only when they possess an absolute and non-negotiable (a philosopher would say: transcendent) identification criterion. Such a criterion, i.e. a binder which guarantees a high nimbleness and resistance to tears in the network, can only be an ideal based on tradition, religion or myth. The Jews, mentioned above, maintain a vital Diaspora in the world mostly thanks to the fact that their identity is based on the myth. The Poles, as a human network with common history, may try to create similar unity based on tradition and the Catholic religion, which is still the most popular provider of myth and relatively permanent values by the Vistula. In this respect Poland enjoys a potential advantage over some western societies which rejected religion as a provider of social bonds (Latin: religio – bond).

Summing up, Poland must urgently learn how to influence confidential, multi-level structures of authority, and maintain internal cultural cohesion. If it fails to do so, there is a danger of long-term marginalization in European politics. Then neo-medievalism, instead of becoming a historic opportunity, will indeed turn out to be another Dark Ages, at least from the perspective of our national interests.

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