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TIMING IS EVERYTHING?

Jordan Alexander Stein

*Periodization and Sovereignty:
How Ideas of Feudalism and
Secularization Govern the Politics
of Time* by Kathleen Davis.
Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Pp. 208.
\$42.50 cloth.

To be blunt: everyone should read this book. There are at least two reasons I think so. The first is the sheer intellectual pleasure to be had in grappling with its challenging and complex argument. The second is the exciting way the book models the kind of comparative, cross-field, interdisciplinary projects that everyone values but that few of us are trained to do. Most clearly spanning medieval studies and postcolonial studies (themselves internally rather diversified fields), *Periodization and Sovereignty* has an audience with anyone, in any field, who wishes to think seriously about time, politics, or history.

The relationship among *Periodization and Sovereignty*'s keywords is avowedly circular. In most basic terms, the book argues that "*the history of periodization is juridical, and it advances through struggle over the definition and location of sovereignty*" (6, original emphasis). The reciprocal relation between these two concepts is demonstrated in two parts, titled "Feudalism" and "Secularization," each consisting of a pair of chapters. Rather than providing a genealogy of these terms, the book demonstrates the extent to which they have been continually interarticulated in deployment and theorization, such that "secularism appeared in relation to feudalism through sovereignty," and "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” (6–7). *Periodization and Sovereignty* makes its case through an impressive range of texts and thinkers, including detailed engagements with the Venerable Bede, William Blackstone, Jean Bodin, Charles Du Moulin, Johannes Fabian, Amitav Ghosh, G. W. F. Hegel, François Hotman, Karl Löwith, and Carl Schmitt.

As the book’s central intervention is historiographic, it initially gives analytical priority to periodization, which, it argues, “results from a *double* movement: the first, a contestatory process of identification *with* an epoch, the categories of which it simultaneously constitutes” and “the second a rejection of that epoch identified in this reduced, condensed form” (30–31, original emphasis). The chief example is the period divide between modernity and the Middle Ages, the latter supposed to be feudal and the former supposed to have progressed past a feudal order. The book shows, however, that *feudalism* was first theorized in (what is now called) the late Renaissance, and that the word comes to English (an invention, packaged as a discovery) from its revival in French thought on the eve of the 1789 revolution. As the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the rise and expansion of a transnational

slave trade, the association in these centuries of a “feudal Middle Ages” with more barbaric, determinedly premodern forms of government seems a disavowal at best.

Yet *Periodization and Sovereignty* refuses to rely on any simple notion of causation or conspiracy that might be encoded in a conceptual operation like *disavowal*. Though certainly not immune to empirical evidence, the book treats the idea of history as an intellectual problem, drawing variously on a notion of doubling (e.g., “double movement” [30, 124], “redoubl[ing]” [85], “double bind” [116]), which suggests a conceptual debt to deconstruction, and on a notion of discursive power, which suggests not only Foucault and de Certeau but also other medievalist scholars (Kathleen Biddick, Carolyn Dinshaw, Bruce Holsinger) who have in different ways explored the tropic deployment of *medievalism*. The book’s predominant mode of argumentation is critical—exposing and explicating the problematic political logics behind familiar and widely used theoretical and historiographic concepts. Yet, the point is never to discover what the “real” history is or who is right or wrong. Rather, *Periodization and Sovereignty* shows how and when the concepts it tracks come into play, arguing that they always do so simultaneously, in a circular fashion.

The sheer range of examples in a book that refuses to simply be a genealogy does, however, offer some

glimpses as to what a constructive (rather than strictly critical) orientation to the book's central problems might be. Of particular note here is chapter 4, which stages an extended engagement between Bede's fourth-century *De temporum ratione* and Ghosh's 1994 monograph *In an Antique Land*. The juxtaposition of these texts about periodization has the intriguing effect of making periodization into a topic to be analyzed rather than an organizing logic that would itself govern analyses. If, however, this chapter is to be a methodological model, that point remains unemphasized (though the author makes clear that this chapter is "more meditation than argument" [103]). Tonally similar moments appear at the closing of chapters; for example, chapter 3 ends with a gesture toward "the difference between the sovereign cut of periodization and the abeyance of that sovereign closure" (102), and the book itself ends with the brazen hope that "periodization must come undone" (134). The idea that an abeyance or an undoing of periodization might disrupt the logics of sovereign power is intriguing, to say the least. Yet, the fact that these hopeful moments of alternative possibility open up at the argument's close leaves some of the most tantalizing implications of the book regrettably unexplored.

Though a brilliant and exciting account of periodization and sovereignty, the argument feels most

significantly limited in its treatment of *secularization*, used most often as a synonym for *progress*. While this is the sense of the word used by the likes of Max Weber, Löwith, and Hans Blumenberg (in debates discussed at length on pages 83–89), the book's treatment of secularization seems largely to work apart from the current multidisciplinary retheorization of this concept, for example in the work of Talal Asad, Charles Taylor, or Michael Warner. This omission is also odd given the detailed ways in which the book engages contemporary theorists of sovereignty with whom it appears to agree, such as Giorgio Agamben. In this sense, there is a certain asymmetry in the treatment of the book's keywords, resulting (surprisingly) in more compelling connections between periodization and feudalism than between sovereignty and secularization.

Nonetheless, if the book does not develop all its implications, it should garner a wide enough audience that their development will come at other hands. Indeed, this impressively distilled little book has impressively large implications for nearly any field of literary scholarship concerned with liberalism, temporality, or historicity—or with the chronological periods that so often structure the boundaries of fields themselves.

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