theories and methodologies

Theory in Time

KATHLEEN DAVIS

Introduction

TO DEFINE OR DESCRIBE THE MIDDLE AGES IS TO TAKE A POLITICAL STANCE, WITTINGLY OR NOT. CONTROVERSY ACCOMPANIES ANY PERIOD definition, of course, as recent skirmishes over the early modern, the modern, and modernity attest. But the politics of the Middle Ages has generally gone under the radar of literary and cultural critique, precisely because of the nature of its formation and its relation to the modern. In fact "the Middle Ages" is a colonial category, developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as (primarily western) Europeans worked to legitimize, classify, and make sense of colonial policies, practices, and encounters. The formation of medieval studies as a discipline, vital to the then incipient discipline of history, was also fully integrated with colonial bureaucracy and administration (Frantzen; Biddick; Dagenais and Greer; Ganim; Kabir; Davis; Davis and Altschul; Lampert-Weissig). As a form of temporal spacing, the category of the Middle Ages enabled the thought of Europe's difference from itself, thus making it possible not only to define European nations across time but also to establish a scale of comparison by which to measure others and to deny them coeval status—that is, equal standing as human beings in regard to law, trade, the capacity for self-rule, and so on.[1]

The "becoming medieval" of the centuries apportioned to the Middle Ages, in other words, was a regulative process providing ideological support for practices with material, economic, political, and institutional effects (such as the extraction of wealth, massive relocation and enslavement of peoples, environmental degradation, and destruction of social systems in conquered territories)—effects that are fully intertwined with the conditions of globalization today. Never a mere backward-looking description, the identification of the Middle Ages was and is a fundamental political technique. As the temporal counterpart to the space of colonialism and slavery, the Middle Ages patrols the limit of modernity and the legitimate nation, from which—like colonialism and slavery—it is thereby excluded as an

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intrinsic element. Simultaneously, the Middle Ages shores up the nationalist paradigms (ethnic, cultural, linguistic) read back on it, thereby effacing complex, interconnected histories as well as the history of its own constitution (Heng; Kinoshita; Mallette; Warren; Altschul).[2] Cordoned off from critique of contemporary problems by simple chronology (as an empirical category it is pre-1492, defined as precapitalist, precolonial), the phenomenon of the Middle Ages poses a limit to the work that theory can do with regard to the legacy and the continuation of colonial tactics and slavery—unless theory confronts this aporia.

These are the stakes, I argue, for a book that takes the title *The* and professes to find that birth in the Middle Ages through Hegel. In this book, Andrew Cole would seem to address the challenge I outline above when he argues that Hegel placed "inside the modern academic discipline [of philosophy] a figure, a form of thought, that is decidedly medieval and indelibly *l* - *t* : dialectic" (xi). With this, he pushes back against centuries of commentary (including Hegel's) that characterized medieval philosophy as stagnant, even nonphilosophical—a characterization that comports, although Cole does not mention it, with the narrative logic that describes both medieval time and colonial space as stasis awaiting modern intervention. I agree with the spirit of this project and with the point that the fundamental structure of contemporary theory has its roots in medieval philosophy and theology. (This point is not new, as Cole recognizes.) I also admire the boldness and the learnedness of this book's reassessment of Hegel's thought and its position in the history of philosophy. However, the book's temporal argument and its narrative method ultimately reinscribe the colonial logic that instantiated "the Middle Ages," even as it effaced its politics. In other words, Cole's book gets caught on one side of and thus reproduces the medieval-colonial aporia, which thereby undermines important elements of his reading of Hegel and the "birth of theory." This will be the focus of my remarks.

Contested Times

The limits encountered and reproduced by *The* can be made visible by briefly considering its relation to Susan Buck-Morss's *He* , which Cole contests but with which his book has much in common.[3] Both authors claim to identify the actual historical context informing Hegel's master-slave (or lord-bondsman) dialectic and to wrest this dialectic from immaterial, metaphorical readings and dependence on classical models.[4] Both also work to overcome the problem that Hegel did not explicitly acknowledge the context that they wish to claim, and both need to work against certain effects of Marxist readings in order to argue for their interpretation of Hegel's dialectic and its world-historical importance.

My main focus in this section is the method of Cole's argument regarding Hegel's context for the lord-bondsman dialectic, particularly his strident opposition to prior claims made by Buck-Morss and similar critics. Buck-Morss contends that the successful slave revolt on the French colony of Saint-Domingue, contemporary with Hegel's writing of the *Phe* and widely covered in the journals he routinely read, directly informed his thinking. "When it came to slavery," she asks, "the most burning social issue of his time, with slave rebellions throughout the colonies and a successful slave revolution in the wealthiest of them—why should—how *c* Hegel have stayed somehow mired in Aristotle?" (59). Cole makes a very different argument for "Hegel's historical present" (xv). He insists that the immediate context of Hegel's dialectic was the feudal Middle Ages since "Hegel effectively lived in the Middle Ages" (because of the persistence of feudalism and certain medieval institutions in Germany) and "accordingly, his narrative

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of master and slave relations resonates with the feudal political conditions of agrarian Germany" (66). Directly confronting Buck-Morss's argument that Hegel "elaborated his dialectic of lordship and bondage deliberately within this contemporary context [i.e., slave revolts]," Cole argues for "a different 'contemporary context,' a persistently medieval or feudal one," and counters that Hegel himself "deliberately chooses the medieval frame of reference to the exclusion of others" (194n9, n10). More insistently, he argues that "modern forms of racialized slavery . . . were not Hegel's concern at this point" (201–02n71). Placing Hegel in an eighteenth-century feudal Middle Ages by virtue of Germany's "economic belatedness," Cole keeps Hegel's focus safely cordoned off from modern "racialized" slavery.

It is certainly ironic but not coincidental that we find these two claims placed in confrontation with each other: a classic case of two excluded terms battling it out. Both authors call attention to this exclusion. Buck-Morss states that "[t]he history of philosophic scholarship is an example of how the colonial experience has been excluded from the stories Western thought tells about itself" (16). Likewise, Cole notes that the long-standing, prevailing history of philosophy defines dialectic "as an expression of ancient and modern ideas." "The problem with this predominant view," he says, "is that it's an assumption built on the wholesale omission of the great middle of intellectual history, the medieval period, which . . . makes the crossing of the ancient and the modern possible in the first place" (24–25).

I hope it is clear that I am not about to take sides in this contest. Rather, I wish to point out that the exclusion of colonial experience and the exclusion of the Middle Ages are the entwined (spatiotemporal) processes through which Europe alleged its modernity and claimed ownership of genuine historical meaning.[5] Certainly, the medieval and the colonial are not at all the same thing, but they share a fundamental relation to the predominant history that both Cole and Buck-Morss contest; as one cancels out the other, they both shore up that very history. Moreover, as the following section will show, the exclusion of either the colonial or the medieval amounts to dehistoricizing Hegel's context.

Feudal Histories

In arguing that the lord-bondsman dialectic is fundamentally feudal, Cole mounts a convincing demonstration that Hegel consistently differentiates between the slave of ancient Greece and Rome and the medieval bondsman, for whom Hegel uses the terms *Sklav* and *Knecht* respectively. *Sklav* marks the condition of slaves before the relationship of lord and bondsman, a relationship that begins with, or as, the dialectical struggle for recognition and its new opportunities for self-consciousness. This pattern is of a piece, Cole suggests, with Hegel's ambitious charting of "a social transformation over the course of history" (77), which places the beginning point for dialectical struggle in the Middle Ages, a proposition that certainly accords with Hegel's divisions of history and his alignment of Christianity with the potential for freedom. This argument, it seems to me, is a signal achievement of Cole's book. We must keep in mind, however, that while for Hegel the availability of dialectical struggle begins with the Middle Ages, according to Cole it persists as a beginning for Hegel's Germany, since he proposes that Hegel's model for this struggle was gleaned not from the study of medieval history but from the contemporary "feudal political conditions of agrarian Germany" (66). It is also important to note (though Cole does not) that slaves contemporary with Hegel, unlike those of classical slavery as Cole argues Hegel understood it, had certainly shown themselves capable of struggle and recognition. Here I will introduce one of my main points: in the context in which Hegel wrote,

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he could not—"deliberately" or otherwise—choose a medieval-feudal frame of reference unsullied by contemporary slavery, because the feudal terms of lord/bondsman, as well as their struggle, were already fully cross-referenced with that slavery and its history.

The impossibility of extirpating slavery contemporary to Hegel from the lord-bondsman dialectic has to do with the fine details of their historical connection: by the time Hegel wrote, colonialism and slavery were already tightly linked with the "feudal" by virtue of the juridical discourse that first generated the narrative of a feudal past for Europe. Well before feudalism's nominalization as an -ism on the eve of the French Revolution, 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. My point here is not to offer another solution to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, but I will note that the massive flow of legal commentaries that achieved the condensation of a "feudal" past for Europe not only grounded arguments regarding the "free" political subject and the social contract but also facilitated the transfer of the problem of slavery from the contemporary slave trade to a brutal past. By the time that Hegel, not to mention Marx, engaged the politically fraught and highly contested concept of a feudal past, it had been at work for centuries. Their analyses owe enormous debts to—and have regenerated—the work of that early feudal historiography.[6] To suppose that we can speak of "medieval feudalism" in a way that escapes such mediation is to brush aside one of the most crucial strategies by which colonizing nations laid claim to sovereignty. Moreover, the discourse that produced the Middle Ages as feudal and aligned with slavery is central to the history that excluded the Middle Ages from the philosophical tradition—in other words, the very history that Cole struggles against.

It is precisely the long-standing discursive entwinement of slavery and the feudal that accounts for the French revolutionaries' rejection of concentrated wealth and "feudal" privileges in terms of "l'esclavage antique" ("ancient slavery"). The logic of this association would also be extended to slavery in the colonies.[7] Without the juridical conceptualization of the relation of lord and vassal in terms of sovereignty and subjection, freedom and slavery, the plight of serfs and slaves (not to mention serfs *as* slaves) would not have come within the ambit of "feudal" discourse, as it had by Hegel's time. (During the time we call the Middle Ages, feudal property relations did not apply to serfs, who were outside the propertied class. The vassal [or "bondsman"] was often noble, sometimes even a king.) *If we ignore the historical processes that generated the narrative of a feudal past, we efface the very history that made "feudal" a critical term in the first place, and we entirely miss the deep historical relation between the feudal and the slavery practiced during Hegel's time; in other words, we dehistoricize the feudal and thus efface its performance in the world.* The birth of theory that Cole wishes to write—free of miscegenation, we might say—depends on this dehistoricized feudal.

Temporalities

The dichotomy that Cole posits between a medieval and a colonial context for Hegel's lord-bondsman dialectic simply does not hold up. Thus his argument for Hegel's exclusion of any but a medieval context does not hold up either. Nor does the wedge he tries to drive between critics who analyze the Haitian Revolution in terms of "modern forms of racialized slavery" and critics who speak of the revolution in "feudal" terms. I make this argument at length not because I am invested in interpretations of Hegel's dialectic per se, but because I am concerned about the politics of "the Middle Ages." There is no doubt, as

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Cole says, that certain economic modes, institutions, and practices common to the time we call the Middle Ages continued to exist in a variety of forms well into modernity—a point that medievalists have been making for a long time, and one that belies the problem of periodization.[8] The crucial issue, however, is not the correctness or incorrectness of a line through time but rather the performance of the periodizing process, which includes the effects I outline above as well as the conceptualization of many historical categories, particularly feudalism. The work of the "becoming feudal" of the time that would soon become "medieval" cannot be whisked away as a problem of mere terminology, and Hegel cannot be insulated from it: its effects saturate his pages. This is not to say that I disagree with every sense of Cole's main contention that Hegel's dialectic is rooted in the time we call the Middle Ages. The salient question regards how we assign content to that Middle Ages and how we describe its existence over time.

In order to think about this question, I consider Cole's assertions that "Germany remained feudal in Hegel's own lifetime (1770–1831) and beyond" and that, as long as such feudal arrangements exist, "there is an institutional apparatus of expropriation, law, language, and socio-symbolic practice that puts you, or someone, effectively in the Middle Ages" (xiii). How does this alignment of the medieval and the feudal work? Clearly one must assign the content "feudal" to "the Middle Ages," which in turn functions as a temporal marker. Indeed, the contention that the Middle Ages is a time that can be found coexisting with other times is integral to Cole's argument. But if, as Cole also argues, feudal arrangements can exist in a range of historical presents (no matter whether you "name it the nineteenth century, call it the twentieth century" [xiii])—if, in other words, the feudal is *not* temporally bound, why does it carry the Middle Ages with it? As Cole's chapters make evident, the alignment of the feudal with the medieval is what enables feudalism to be a marker of the past and the present at the same time. This double temporality depends on the ability of the Middle Ages to function as a specific time, with specific content—in this case feudalism—but also as a designation that can be brought into other times precisely because its feudal content is not temporally bound.

This temporal slippage rests on the centuries of juridical discourse that had narrativized feudal relations (thus instilling a temporal quality), and it silently underwrites the single-stranded story of development by which the feudalism of Hegel's Germany attests "Europe's economic belatedness" in comparison to England (Cole 118). We can more fully understand how this process works if we keep in mind that the Middle Ages did not precede this theory of history but came into being as an enabling condition of its developmental narrative and its spatialization. In other words, the "becoming medieval" of the Middle Ages provided the hinge that made possible the spatiotemporal narrative of modern development.

The implications of this process are apparent in Cole's elaboration of his temporal thesis. "Uneven development" in Marxist analysis, he suggests, should be taken to indicate "the co-presence of times and histories, each on different tempos" (118). This proposition is seductive, especially given current efforts to think multiple temporalities. But the very identification of these different tempos of development requires, as Reinhart Koselleck phrases it, mediation by a "stable coefficient of change" (8), and here that coefficient clearly belongs to a singularized trajectory of capitalism and modernity.[9] Cole elsewhere suggests that Marx treats this issue of temporality dialectically, that Marx is not "concerned only to make empirical observations about the persistence of this or that medieval mode of production or institution in modernity." Rather,

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> He is after something more complex, something that identifies the medieval residing in a new domain that subsumes, evacuates, and rewrites history—the domain of capital—but which cannot entirely expunge the medieval from its own economic structures and social logics, because—to think this problem through dialectically—capital needs those structures in place, those logics in mind, and the medieval just happens to express this necessity within capitalism. (103)

But a problem remains. To accept the label "medieval" for economic relations that exist within but do not smoothly conform to capital's economic structures and social logics is to obscure the operations of economic domination now. There is no copresence of times and histories here, only points on a single temporal trajectory already determined in both directions: one narrative with one temporality. Capital may stage this kind of cross-temporal dialectic wherever it "needs" these structures and logics in place, but critique must grapple with its operation as an indicator of present forces, not the residence of a medieval logic within the domain of capital.

In his section on literature, Cole does some fascinating work on genre as a resource for dialectic, for positioning critique, and for bringing different times into confrontation. This work bears some resemblance to his closing gesture toward a "kind of historicism attentive to the dialectic of figure/concept" that draws "our attention to the conceptual and figurative relays between past and present, in which retrospection is . . . a way of acknowledging where the past figuratively exceeds its own time and place" (161). This promising approach is not the one taken by Cole in his argument for the exclusively medieval-feudal context of Hegel's lord-bondsman dialectic, an argument, as he says, that employs the "familiar text/context hermeneutic that characterizes historicism" (161). What follows from this historicist reading—its method of joining text and context as well as its handling of temporality—is what I question about Cole's book. Cole keeps his arguments for excluding competing contexts securely within his notes (telling in itself), but, for this reader at least, his insistence on exclusion is troubling in a book that claims to find the "birth of theory" in Hegel's dialectic of identity/difference and suggests that this dialectic "explains struggle, no matter the historical setting" (67).

The Middle Ages and the World

One further aspect of this book's method that I wish to examine here is the relation between Cole's treatment of history and Hegel's vision of history. In addition to its argument regarding the context of the lord-bondsman dialectic, *The Birth of Theory* traces another, far more complex relation between Hegel's theory and the Middle Ages—namely, the centrality of medieval thought to his dialectic. I admire Cole's uncompromising claim that "'[t]he dialectic,' so often discussed within critical theory, is a product of the Middle Ages and not classical antiquity" (24). He contends that the medieval dialectic of identity and difference begins with Plotinus "and includes Proclus, who systematized so many of Plotinus's ideas and transmitted them to later medieval thinkers from Pseudo-Dionysius to Nicholas of Cusa" (26). These indeed are the philosophers Cole studies in order to trace both the difference between classical and postclassical dialectic and the particular character of the dialectic that he teases out in Hegel and puts into conversation with Marx. Thus he moves from the Mediterranean "Neoplatonist" cluster—Plotinus, Proclus, and Pseudo-Dionysius (third to sixth centuries)—to the German Nicholas of Cusa (fifteenth century). Cole's chosen philosophers thereby come from the extreme ends of the era typically called the Middle Ages.

By skipping from Pseudo-Dionysius to Nicholas of Cusa, Cole's analysis leaps over nearly a millennium of medieval philosophy,

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an odd tactic for a project seeking to ground Hegel's dialectic firmly in the Middle Ages.[10] Cole acknowledges that numerous other philosophers could have been added to this discussion "and made to conform to the narrative," but that, however helpful such figures might be, "they would also complicate and perhaps overcomplicate the dialectic when what's now needed is an exposition that for once risks clarity and simplification" (27).[11] What kinds of losses might accompany this simplification?

I want to connect this question to the point Cole makes as he argues against histories of philosophy that "define dialectic as the expression of ancient and modern ideas," an assumption "built on the wholesale omission of the great middle of intellectual history, the medieval period, which, through the transmission of the relevant classical texts on dialectic and commentary thereon, makes the crossing of the ancient and the modern possible in the first place" (24–25). This transmission of classical texts and commentaries, as is well known and as Hegel himself notes, occurred through massive translation projects, first (mainly) from Greek to Syriac and Arabic and, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, from Arabic to Latin and disseminated throughout Europe. In addition, Islamic as well as some Judaic commentaries on Aristotle were translated into Latin and eagerly transmitted, read, and commented on, with fundamental consequences for medieval European philosophy.[12] This history, though largely non-European and non-Christian, has a substantial claim on the "great middle" of intellectual history that Cole defends, and it is the history directly responsible for much of the philosophical world that Hegel inherited and that he would confront.

At this point, it is salutary to remember that the Middle Ages was constituted as European (more specifically, western European) and that this territorial boundary had a shaping effect on academic disciplines, in that non-European areas were excluded from fundamental histories (politics, sovereignty, law, philosophy) conceived as moving from ancient Greece and Rome, through the power centers of Europe's Christian Middle Ages, and to fruition in modern Europe, even though for most of what we call the Middle Ages the engines of scholarship were in the east and south. This territorial history is part of the colonial logic of the Middle Ages.[13] It is quite easy, and unsurprising, to see the parallels between this historiographical pattern and the history of self-consciousness and freedom that Hegel traces, particularly its movement from Greece and Rome to Christian Germanic Europe. It is surprising, however, to see how closely Cole's philosophical study tracks this history as it leaps from the sixth-century eastern Mediterranean to fifteenth-century Christian Germany—thus skirting the complicating factors of the "great middle" that routed the lion's share of intellectual history through areas now associated with the Middle East and northern Africa, as well as al-Andalus and other parts of southern Europe, and through Islam and Judaism.

As recent decades of Hegel scholarship have demonstrated, it is possible to recognize the deplorable elements of Hegel's account of world history without diminishing his theoretical accomplishments. However, it is undeniable that this account, which holds itself out as the history of the emergence of philosophy and freedom, has implications for a project that would find the "birth of theory" in Hegel's engagement with the Middle Ages. Cole wishes to overcome "the arbitrary distinctions between medieval and modern" and to acknowledge Hegel's "debt to a Middle Ages still persisting in his own time" (xviii). The temporal assumptions underlying such statements are what cause the argument of his book to miss the point regarding the place of the Middle Ages in the history of philosophy as well as other consequential histories. The periodization of the Middle Ages has

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never been a matter of arbitrary distinctions or lines through time: these are mere effects of the regulative process of the "becoming medieval" of the Middle Ages and the full engagement of this process with colonialism and slavery. The very fact that Cole feels compelled to mount this argument in the first place is a result of that process. Moreover, there is no Middle Ages existing (or persisting)—either discursively or materially—in the eighteenth century that is not already mediated by this process. These points do not negate Cole's aim to identify Hegel's debt to the Middle Ages. Rather, they redouble the stakes.

The stakes are indeed high, given *The Birth of Theory*'s ambitious claim that Hegel's definition of the dialectic provides the "fundamental structure" for "the deconstructing of binaries and paradigms, the tracking of identities in difference, the exposition of 'intersectional' identity, the critique of ideology, normativity, representation, and institutions" (xii). If this theory has taught us anything, it is the ability to understand that the forces and histories responsible for shaping Hegel's development of his dialectic, as well as his perception of its history, exceeded his deliberate choices and his political-economic-philosophical interpretations. Any "birth of theory" stemming from Hegel, in other words, must exceed Hegel.

Notes

1. The classic analysis of this temporal mapping is of course Fabian, *Time and the Other.* Some scholars distinguish between the Middle Ages and "the Middle Ages," with the former indicating the chronological time apportioned to the Middle Ages and the latter indicating the narrative construction. I will not employ that practice here because I do not find the distinctions so easily separable. I sometimes use "the Middle Ages" when referring to the term as coined.

2. The scholarship on the historical relations of the category of the Middle Ages and colonialism is not homogeneous. Like any field dispersed across disciplines, national traditions, imperial histories, and institutional positions, it takes many routes and evinces various points of emphasis.

3. Buck-Morss published the essay "Hegel and Haiti" in *Critical Inquiry* in 2000. It is reprinted with a new introduction in *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, together with a new section, "Universal History."

4. Cole argues that "lord" and "bondsman" are more appropriate translations for Hegel's terms *Herr* and *Knecht* than "master" and "slave." For the sake of consistency, I will use "lord" and "bondsman" here, although, as I will argue, these terms cannot be neatly pried apart.

5. I would not characterize these as the *only* exclusions, however. Within the discourse of modernity, as Joan Wallach Scott points out, the attributes assigned to the medieval and the colonial (such as irrational, superstitious, traditional, backward) also circumscribe the position of women in national politics and secure their association with the Orient and the colonized.

6. I can only gesture toward this history here. These points are discussed at length in chs. 1 and 2 of Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty.*

7. See, e.g., the discussion in Blackburn, ch. 6.

8. Likewise, many scholars have shown that characteristics typically considered modern existed at least since the twelfth century. These important findings, like those showing the durability of medieval forms, testify to the work of periodization even though they do not directly expose its process or performance.

9. Koselleck himself repeats some of the most egregious versions of periodization, but, in his struggle with the temporal problems involved in the conceptualization of history, he also identifies some of periodization's most crucial issues.

10. This is especially the case given Cole's complaint that at least one recent critic "classifies some medieval philosophers and theologians as either *via antiqua* or *via moderna*, Proclus on the one hand and Nicholas of Cusa on the other . . . as if to say there can be no medieval influence" (176n4).

11. In his preface, Cole gives a different rationale for his choices, stating that Hegel knew and lectured on many other kinds of dialectic extant in the Middle Ages, but that the dialectic of identity/difference, which Cole finds only in Plotinus and a few others, is Hegel's dialectic (xviii).

12. Most Greek philosophical texts, including key texts of Plato and Aristotle, were lost to western Europe but were preserved by scholars in the eastern Byzantine Empire and the Near East. From the mid-eighth through the tenth centuries, texts by Plato and nearly all the nonliterary and nonhistorical texts of Aristotle, as well as many important commentaries on those texts, were translated into Arabic, mainly in Baghdad, with the accession of the Abbasid dynasty. Beginning in the late eleventh century, many of these Arabic translations,

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along with two centuries of commentaries on Aristotle by Islamic philosophers, were translated into Latin (mainly in Toledo), resulting in a philosophical sea change in western Europe. See Gutas; Burnett.

13. Many medievalists have recently been working to excavate the historical connections that have been effaced or distorted by this historiography. In addition to the works I cite above, see, e.g., *The Medieval Globe* (www.arc-humanities.org/the-medieval-globe.html); *The Global Middle Ages* (www.laits.utexas.edu/gma/portal/); and some of the essays in the Theories and Methodologies cluster "Medieval Studies in the Twenty-First Century" (*PMLA* 124.2 [2009]).

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