

The Uses of the Medieval Past in Contemporary European Political Discourse: Some Reflections Arising from the Portuguese Case

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Abstract

References to the past have always been a common trope in political discourse. Either alluding to more recent or distant periods, processes, events, figures, or works, political actors and groups often use the past to convey certain ideas or aspects of their own agenda. This article examines the uses of the Middle Ages in twenty-first-century political discourse, using Portugal as a starting point within a broader European context. We delve into several explicit and implicit verbal and non-verbal references to the medieval past made by local, regional, and national political agents and groups. Three questions guide our research: 1) Are criteria of truthfulness and correctness relevant for this type of discourse? 2) Is it effective? 3) What are the differences between political ideologies when it comes to using the Middle Ages? We argue that the instrumentalization of the medieval past goes far beyond ideology itself, and that its value resides more in its political effectiveness than in the veracity of the claims and the intentionality or awareness of the agents that use this rhetorical device.

Keywords

Middle Ages, Uses of the past, Medievalism, Political discourse, Portugal

Resumo

As referências ao passado foram sempre um motivo recorrente no discurso político. Tanto aludindo a acontecimentos mais recentes como a épocas, processos, eventos, figuras ou trabalhos temporalmente mais distantes, os atores e grupos políticos usam com frequência o passado para transmitir determinadas ideias ou aspetos da sua própria agenda. O presente artigo examina os usos da Idade Média no discurso político do século XXI, tendo Portugal como ponto de partida e situando-o no contexto europeu mais amplo. Debruçamo-nos sobre várias referências—explícitas e implícitas, verbais e não verbais—ao passado medieval feitas por agentes e grupos políticos a nível local, regional e nacional. Três questões conduziram a nossa investigação: 1) Serão a veracidade e a correção critérios relevantes para este tipo de discurso? 2) Em que medida são estes discursos eficazes? 3) Quais as diferenças entre ideologias políticas no que toca aos usos da Idade Média? A nossa tese é que a instrumentalização do passado medieval é algo que ultrapassa as fronteiras ideológicas, sendo que o seu valor reside mais na sua eficácia política que na veracidade das suas afirmações ou na intencionalidade/consciência por parte dos agentes que usam este instrumento retórico.

Palavras-chave

Idade Média, usos do passado, medievalismo, discurso político, Portugal

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Introduction

References to time and temporality are frequent in political discourse. According to Teun A. van Dijk (1997), references to the present tend to be negative, in contrast with references to the future—usually positive—or to the past—ambivalent—depending on the message that they want to convey. Furthermore, the use of a positive or negative view of the past does not necessarily depend on the ideology of political players, since both conservatives and progressives may refer to the “good old times.” Therefore, other factors are to be considered, such as access to power. Not surprisingly, politicians in power tend to make use of more positive references about the present than those politicians in the opposition, who display a much more negative attitude towards the present, use the past as a full repository of examples and lessons, and promise a positive future should they come to power (Van Dijk 1997: 27).

This article examines references to the medieval past in contemporary political discourse in Europe, using the Portuguese presidential elections of January 2021 as a starting point. This phenomenon was first addressed in a short press article that suggested how, why, and when the medieval past was being used in the Portuguese political sphere (Martins and Miguélez Caveró 2021). In this paper, that initial analysis is expanded by further developing the Portuguese case and placing it in a broader European context by considering the approaches followed by other scholars from medievalism studies (Elliott 2017; Carpegna Falconieri 2019; Wollenberg 2018). The selective use of the Middle Ages in political discourse will be explored to discuss and answer the following questions: 1) Are criteria of truthfulness and correctness relevant for this type of discourse? 2) To what extent is it effective? 3) Do ideological differences shape the use of the medieval past in political discourse, and if so, how?

Materials and Method

The period under investigation encompasses the first two decades of the twenty-first century. We analyze this subject in a very specific political, economic, and social context. In political terms, various factors must be taken into consideration. First, the emergence and/or electoral growth of both left- and right-wing political parties often described as “populist,” which gradually moved from the margins to the mainstream of the political spectrum and were “normalised” (Wodak 2020). In some countries, they led to the end of a two-party system. Second, the surge of (broadly speaking) “separatist” processes such as the unilateral

independence of Kosovo in 2008, Scotland and Catalonia's referendums in 2014 and 2017, and the Brexit referendum in 2016. Other important factors include: the occurrence of radical Islamic terrorist attacks across Europe since 2004; the Great Recession of 2007–2009 and the subsequent European debt crisis; public debates on migration, refugees, and asylum, particularly since the so-called “migrant crisis” of 2015; debates on climate change; and the sanitary crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, since this article was mostly written in 2021, other processes and events that took place in 2022 have not been taken into account, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Giorgia Meloni's rise to power in Italy and the entry of VOX into a coalition government in the Spanish region of Castile and León.

We adopt the concept of discourse followed by the *Discourse Historical Approach* (DHA), understood as the socially constituted as well as constitutive semiotic practice which represents, creates, reproduces, and changes social reality; it is, furthermore, “a communicative and interactional macro-unit that transcends the unit of a single text or conversation” (Reisigl 2017: 51). As far as political discourse is concerned, we adopt Van Dijk's (1997) definition, which regards political discourse as the discourse produced by political elites in an institutional context with the aim of carrying out a political action. We left other forms of political discourse, such as media discourse on political issues or discourse produced by civil society actors (Randour et al. 2020), out of this article-length analysis but intend to consider it in future research.

Regarding the authors of political discourse, we considered presidents, prime ministers, and members of government, parliament, or political parties, at local, regional, and national levels. Both oral and written forms of political discourse are part of our corpus, such as parliamentary debates, television debates, individual interviews, campaign manifestos and programs, press articles, and social network interactions. We paid attention to verbal and non-verbal communication. Along with text and verbal utterances, visual rhetoric, understood here as the use of communicative artifacts presented to an audience to promote communication (Foss 2004, 2005), plays a crucial role. Words are accompanied by a wide array of gestures, performances, and other forms of non-discursive rhetoric. Similarly, monuments, images, artifacts, symbols, and traditions related directly or indirectly to the Middle Ages are frequently the subject of visits, display, reference, use, and manipulation by political actors. They were therefore also included in our analysis along with the textual and verbal material.

We looked for both explicit and implicit references to the medieval past, including the use of the expression “Middle Ages” and the adjective “medieval” themselves, but also

more indirect invocations of this historical period, such as “*Reconquista*,” “Crusade,” and “Dark Ages,” as well as specific episodes and figures. As for the chronological range of the references, we adopted the conventional conception of the “Middle Ages” as the historical period from the fifth to the fifteenth century.

Results

Among the discourse strategies accounted for by DHA (Reisigl and Wodak 2009; Reisigl 2017), the ones that concern predication and argumentation stand out in the analysis of the use of the Middle Ages in contemporary political discourse. Argumentation evaluates any identifiable *topoi* and fallacies, whereas predication foregrounds the positive and negative characteristics, qualities and features attributed to the Middle Ages. The analysis of political discourse reveals that the Middle Ages are situated within three forms of discursive frame: the positive and triumphal view, which presents the medieval past as the nation’s origins and pure essence; the negative and grotesque view, which leads political actors to talk about the medieval period as barbaric, primitive, violent, and backward—what Daniel Wollenberg (2018: 10–19) calls “dark medievalism”; and a more ambiguous and inconsistent use, which balances the two previous views and sometimes blends them.

The Positive View of the Middle Ages

Positive assessment of the medieval period is often linked to nationalist nostalgia that evokes the political myth of a golden age (Girardet 1986). The Middle Ages are thus consciously instrumentalized in a way that presents the medieval past as a social and political model in contrast to the supposed present decline.

In Portugal, a significant example of this is the campaign of André Ventura, candidate in the 2021 Portuguese presidential elections and leader of the right-wing political party Chega (“Enough”). On 17 January 2021, Ventura gave a speech in front of Guimarães Castle, a building with strong associations with the origins of the Portuguese kingdom in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Gomes and Fernandes 2021a).

In the campaign days that followed, Ventura visited two more landmarks connected with the Portuguese Middle Ages: the tomb of the first King of Portugal, Afonso Henriques (1109?–1185), in the Monastery of Santa Cruz in Coimbra (Gomes and Fernandes 2021b); and the Monastery of Batalha, built in the aftermath of the decisive Battle of Aljubarrota, a

victory over Castilian troops in the context of the 1383–85 interregnum. In the latter, Ventura placed a flower bouquet next to the nearby equestrian statue of Nuno Álvares Pereira (1360–1431), the nobleman who commanded the Portuguese armies at the time (Gomes and Fernandes 2021c). Ventura’s use of the medieval past can be inserted in a long tradition that regards the Middle Ages as the founding period of the Portuguese nation and the one in which its features allegedly assumed their purest form (Martins 2016).

The same 1383–85 interregnum was also invoked by the left wing of the political spectrum in the context of the 2021 presidential campaign. During the televised debate between the independent candidate Vitorino Silva and the communist candidate João Ferreira, the latter challenged his opponent’s claim that the “Portuguese people” had never been in power during its entire history. According to Ferreira, two occasions illustrated this: the “Carnation Revolution” of 1974 and 1383–1385, when, in his words, the “people took the lead and acclaimed the Master of Avis” (RTP 2021). This reading of events corresponds to an anachronistic, static, and transtemporal idea of “people” and also to the Marxist view of history as a class struggle.

Beyond this election campaign, the positive, triumphal medieval past has emerged in similar form in Portuguese political discourse over the last two decades. During this period, the presidents of the Portuguese Republic Aníbal António Cavaco Silva (2006–2016) and Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa (2016–present), both former leaders of the center-right Social Democratic Party (PSD), made use of medieval figures such as the first King of Portugal Afonso Henriques and Nuno Álvares Pereira. For example, on 24 June 2009—the anniversary of the Battle of São Mamede (1128), in which Afonso Henriques defeated the armies of his mother, Countess Teresa—Cavaco Silva gave a speech in Guimarães, the city next to the battle site, in which he described the first King of Portugal as the “founder” of Portuguese nationality and stated that “each Portuguese generation continued” the monarch’s work (LUSA 2009). Rebelo de Sousa has also alluded to Afonso Henriques on several occasions. For instance, in his speech during his presidential inauguration in March 2016, he alluded to the “belief in the miracles of Ourique” as one of the sentiments defining Portuguese national identity (Presidência da República Portuguesa 2016a). According to tradition, Christ had appeared before the first King of Portugal, Afonso Henriques, on the eve of the Battle of Ourique (25 July 1139), promising him victory against the Muslim armies. This foundational story dates to the Middle Ages, reached great popularity during the dynastic union of Portugal with Spain (1580–1640) and became one of the greatest Portuguese national myths (Buescu 1987). Another medieval messianic figure alluded to by

the current President Rebelo de Sousa is Nuno Álvares Pereira, a medieval military hero, and a symbol of chivalric values (Leal 1999: 51–89). He was canonized in 2009, and on 9 April 2016, on the occasion of the *Dia do Combatente* (“Combatant Day”), a yearly commemoration that pays homage to the soldiers who fought for the Portuguese nation, Rebelo de Sousa promised “to do everything so that the spirit of D. Nuno Álvares Pereira remains as a model and guide for the combatants of the future” (Silva 2016). In the same year, he inaugurated a new statue of the hero in Lisbon and in 2019 made him patron of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (Presidência da República 2016b; Rocha 2019).

This nostalgic use of the medieval past in Portugal needs to be understood as part of a broader European phenomenon, where it characterizes the political praxis of several political parties, leaders, and players. The general Portuguese context has three particularly close matches in the European political spectrum: parties from the ID Group (Identity and Democracy) in the current European Parliament (Biscaia and Salgado 2022); political players in territories with independentist and separatist agendas; and politicians from East-Central Europe with de-sovietization agendas and a resurgent politics of remembrance.

One of the most relevant discursive strategies they all have in common is the frequent reference to either real or legendary medieval figures and events which are claimed to have played a crucial role in shaping national history. They are presented as examples for the present, either for their commitment to alleged struggles for freedom and independence or for their ethical and moral values (self-sacrifice, patriotism), but ultimately as representatives of “golden ages” and the “pure” origins of a nation or a nation-to-be. Along with text and oratory, visual rhetoric, understood as the use of artifacts presented to an audience to promote communication, plays a major role here. This kind of strategy can be identified in other European regions where different historical periods and their respective legacies are subject to similar use (Wodak and Forchtner 2014; Gori 2014), in different degrees of intensity and symbolism.

On a first level there are, for instance, performances that might be analyzed under the umbrella of the so-called fictionalization of politics, mixing reality and fiction, information, and entertainment in the political sphere (Wodak and Forchtner 2014; Groebner 2017: 124; Wodak and Forchtner 2018). A second and higher level of intensity, however, is illustrated by Matteo Salvini’s 2018 bid to re-establish Italy’s Lega Nord. While Salvini created new statutes and established new headquarters, he kept the logo of the previous party, which since 1989 has displayed the figure of legendary hero Alberto da Giussano (Coleman 2003). In fact, Salvini’s official photograph on the new party homepage

shows him wearing a blazer decorated with a pin representing Giussano (Lega per Salvini Premier 2023). A third level of intensity can be identified when political actors in power promote more complex strategies at the local, regional, or national levels. This can be illustrated by several examples, such as the 2000 Hungarian millennial commemorations (Fowles 2004; László 2003); the Istanbul Panorama 1453 Historical Museum, inaugurated in 2009 (Bozoğlu 2020); the unveiling ceremony of the statue of King Svätopluk I of Moravia in the courtyard of Bratislava Castle in 2010 (Burzova 2012); the unveiling ceremony of the monument to Vladimir the Great in Moscow in 2016 (Griffin 2020); or the 2020 Scottish National party project to turn Scottish medieval castles into hotels (Livingston 2020). In the Scottish case, a convergence of political, ideological, and economic interests can be pointed out.

Another issue to be considered when it comes to the idealization of the medieval past is its use to promote the obliteration of other historical periods. The Baltic region stands out in this regard, since political discourse has pitched a traumatic and violent Soviet era against a memorable, “golden” medieval period. Figures such as Duke Vytautas the Great and King Mindaugas have been used to symbolically oppose the Soviet period (Šmidchens 2017). This phenomenon began with the independence of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia from the Soviet Union and continued well into the twenty-first century (Makhotina 2020).

Furthermore, it must be noted that different political parties and ideologies use the same nostalgic figures, symbols, heritage sites, and monuments to defend and legitimize their respective and, at times, opposing ideologies. They might even try to prevent such appropriation by their political opponents. Three examples of this are: the Monastery of Ripoll and the celebration of the *Diada de Sant Jordi* (Saint George’s Day) in Catalonia; Joan of Arc in France (Emery and Morowitz 2003: 22–25; Firmonasari 2020); Ortenberg 2006: 177–178); and the Battle of Kosovo in the Balkans (Djokic 2009; Jovanović 2021; Laustsen and Kühle 2006).

Beyond individual European territories, the case of the European Union as a supranational institution is also relevant to the study of the use of the Middle Ages in contemporary political discourse. Since its creation in the mid-twentieth century, the EU made great efforts to legitimize its existence by designing a European identity based on common roots, especially the medieval past. Charlemagne was promoted as the “Father of Europe,” and artistic movements such as the Romanesque were advertised as “the first European style” (Carpegna Falconieri 2019: 200–204). In the early decades of the twenty-first century, some scholars have even positively described the EU itself as a “neo-medieval”

polycentric empire (Zielonka 2006). Meanwhile, anti-European rhetoric has also involved the instrumentalization of the medieval past. Two cases stand out: the UK, in the context of Brexit, where a “Brexit medievalism” phenomenon has been identified by several scholars (Berger 2019 & 2021; Elliott 2020); and Switzerland, where the myth of Wilhelm Tell has been a recurring trope in the propaganda of the SVP and the Swiss far-right (Marchal 2011: 214–216).

The Negative View of the Middle Ages

Either as a potential risk and dystopic scenario or as a disaster that has already occurred, a negative assessment of the Middle Ages is common to many contemporary political contexts with reference a range of issues, as the period is deployed using different mechanisms and with various aims.

In Portugal, several examples of this concern legal issues. In January 2021, during a televised debate framed by their 2021 presidential campaigns, Chega leader André Ventura and the socialist Ana Gomes were discussing the reintroduction of life imprisonment (TVI 2021). The latter rejected it and, significantly raising her voice, stated that it was “a matter of not going back to the Middle Ages.” She was thus using the medieval past to warn against a potential regression to a time she considered primitive and backwards in terms of its legal system. Some months prior, the government of the autonomous region of the Azores could be constituted only because of Chega’s endorsement, a move that was deemed controversial even among the members of the center-right PSD, the party enabling the agreement. The former Secretary of State of the PSD José Eduardo Martins scorned Chega and defended the party line, arguing that it rejected “the death penalty, life imprisonment and any medieval judicial mockery” (Leite and Martins 2020). In other instances, Portuguese political actors have used medieval references to argue that a step backward is taking place or has already taken place. In this way, in 2009, Moisés Espírito Santo, local leader of the left-wing party Bloco de Esquerda (BE) in the Leiria region, made use of this comparison to criticize working conditions in Portugal. At a political rally, he warned that justice only targeted the poor in Portugal and thus resembled a “medieval justice” that could only be changed by a party that was not “committed to the past,” such as the BE (Bloco de Esquerda 2009).

The negative view of the Middle Ages has also come up in Portuguese political discourse over the last two decades also in relation to other topics, for instance in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. The leader of Porto’s PS and MEP Manuel Pizarro rejected the

Portuguese government's idea of establishing a *cordon sanitaire* around the city of Porto, describing it as “useless” and “medieval” (Paulo 2020).

Statements and opinions on legal issues and justice elsewhere Europe also led to this view of the medieval past being expressed. The COVID-19 outbreak has been fertile ground for opinions illustrated by negative views about the Middle Ages, particularly the risk of returning to this era. Another notable example is the 2017 intervention in the Italian parliament by M5S leader Di Maio, in which he described life-long pensions for parliamentarians as “medieval privileges” (MoVimento 5 Stelle 2017: min. 2:20). This negative view of the Middle Ages as a time of decadence antithetical to periods characterized by higher levels of civilization and culture—namely antiquity and modernity—are frequent across Europe.

Quantitatively speaking, the case of the UK's former prime minister Boris Johnson needs to be stressed here since this formula seems to be a leitmotif in his political discourse. In July 2005, in the wake of the London bombings, he published an article in *The Spectator* (Johnson 2005) where he lamented the alleged lack of an Enlightenment movement in the Islamic world and asked: “When is someone going to get eighteenth century on Islam's mediaeval ass?” (Elliott 2017: 202). Two more articles published on the Greek economy and its relation to the EU in June 2012 reveal the use of tropes such as “civilisation collapse” (Johnson 2012a) and “return to the Dark Ages” (Johnson 2012b). Similarly, in 2015, during an interview with the German newspaper *Spiegel*, he declared that “Humanity would have plunged into a new dark age of absolutely frightening and appalling characteristics without Churchill” (Hüetlin and Scheuermann 2015).

These statements also illustrate that political actors resort to formulas such as “history teaches us” and “history proves,” which can ultimately be traced back to two well-known Ciceronian *topoi*: *Plena exemplorum est historia* and *historia magistra vitae*. This ancient *topos* of history as a teacher has remained very popular over time (Koselleck 2004), and pervades contemporary political debate globally (Forchtner 2014 & 2016). As any *topos* used in political discourse, it might become an integral part of a strategic plan, but also become a fallacy when it breaks the rules of rational argumentation (Wodak et al. 2009: 35; Wodak 2020: 55).

The negative view of the Middle Ages has also been invoked frequently to discuss issues such as immigration, civil order, and crime. Generally, the Middle Ages are presented as a time of backwardness, disorder, and chaos. An example can be found in a 2015 speech by the Thuringian *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) parliamentary group leader Björn Höcke at the third congress of the German *Institut für Staatspolitik*, in which he called for the

reorientation of asylum and immigration policy and claimed that the German Federal Republic was experiencing a state of collapse and could slide into “a new Middle Ages.”

More specifically, the intense Europe-wide public debate about migration, refugees, and asylum seekers puts Islam in the spotlight. This needs to be addressed as part of a broader phenomenon that has characterized western political discourse since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Since then, the characterization of Islam as a “medieval” religion and culture has been a recurrent trope (Monagle and D’Arcens 2014; Elliott 2017). The “clash of civilizations” discourse fueled the idea of the West as a “modern” civilization” and Islam as “medieval” (Holsinger 2007: 6–7; Carpegna Falconieri 2019: 33–35). In this view, Arab and Middle Eastern countries inhabit a premodern world prone to violence, which the West has escaped thanks to the Enlightenment and industrialization (Groebner 2008: 149–150). This is not surprising considering the inherent connection between the origins of medievalism and orientalism in Western culture (Ganim 2005).

In Europe, this phenomenon has gradually become more prominent over the last two decades (Akbaba 2016; Brubaker 2017; Meret 2009; Meret and Gregersen 2019; Pauwels 2013). It has led to a very specific rhetoric based on the us vs. them dichotomy, which has even become central to the political strategy of parties like the Austrian FPÖ (Forchtner et al. 2013; Wodak 2011). The anti-Muslim rhetoric produced by these political players represents Islamic values and traditions as fundamentally opposed to European (Christian) ones, characterizing them instead as “medieval.” The adjective is employed to convey the message of a backward period and thus to legitimize a xenophobic discourse and anti-immigration policies (Monagle and D’Arcens 2014). In addition, specific allusions to “medieval” Islam as a sexist culture need to be stressed, especially in those countries where public discussion of gender issues, sexism, and misogyny is more prevalent, such as Germany (Hestermann and Hoven 2020).

In addition to this kind of pejorative use of the term “medieval” to vilify specific cultures and traditions such as Islam, a negative view of the Middle Ages also appears in European political discourse to discredit the political sphere in itself: institutions, parties, and politicians. In her 2019 book *Il Medioevo in Parlamento*, Elena Fattori, a dissident senator of the Five Star Movement (M5S), accused the whole Italian political class of representing a “return to the Middle Ages” for the way they approached such scientific issues as vivisection and vaccines. Also in Italy, the political reactions to the celebration of the thirteenth World Congress of Families need to be pointed out (Verona 2019); the event brought together various “pro-life” and anti-LGBTQ+ movements and associations, and led to a

confrontation between the two government coalition partners, the Lega party and Five Star Movement, as the former supported the event and the latter criticized it, accusing the Lega and his leader Matteo Salvini of prompting a “return to the Middle Ages” (Buffagni 2019).

We can also identify more direct accusations against specific political actors. In 2017, during a political meeting in Lille in the run-up to the French presidential election, the candidate of *La France insoumise*, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, pointed directly to his main competitors, Marine Le Pen, Emmanuel Macron, and François Fillon and declared that all of them represented the Middle Ages—a period to which France would return if any one of these three candidates won the election (Mélenchon 2017).

The Entangled and Ambiguous Meaning of the Middle Ages

Both positive and negative invocations of the Middle Ages in political discourse can be traced back to the very foundations of the concept of the “Middle Ages.” Described by Italian humanists as an era between the cultural achievements of antiquity and the dawn of a new time, the medieval period was, from the beginning, imbued with negative traits. This “dark” view largely persisted throughout the following centuries and became historically dominant, despite the radical reassessment of the Middle Ages conducted by Romantic authors. However, as David Matthews argues, not even these authors dared to deny the “Gothic rudeness” of the period, simply suggesting that such rudeness was balanced with other elements (chivalric, communal, and spiritual values, etc.). Thus, the romantic Middle Ages “did not replace the Gothic vision but existed in tension with it” (Matthews 2015: 20–25). Indeed, in current contemporary politics the notion of the Middle Ages might show itself as an entangled, ambiguous, and multifaceted phenomenon.

In Portugal in the spring of 2020, in the wake of the attacks on monuments and memorials related to colonialism and slavery during the global protests triggered by the murder of George Floyd, President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa unequivocally rejected the reappraisal of prominent figures from Portugal’s national past, giving the example of King Afonso Henriques, who, according to him, had “persecuted Muslims” (Almeida 2020). On the one hand, Rebelo de Sousa was feeding ideas of the medieval past as a time of confrontation, fighting, and clash of civilizations. On the other hand, he was implicitly considering the Portuguese king’s actions as legitimate and denying the necessity of critically reviewing their memorialization.

Other Portuguese political players have gone further and adopted a sharper discourse, for instance far-right leader André Ventura. In an opinion piece dated to July 2016, in the wake of the Nice truck attack, he argued that it was “essential to drastically reduce the presence and size of Islamic communities within the European Union” (Ventura 2016). His anti-Islamic rhetoric, which included the conflation of Islam, migration, and terrorism, would be significantly ramped up over the following years to eventually constitute one of the ideological pillars of the party he founded in 2019, Chega. Its *Founding Political Manifesto* states: “The defense of a neutral State in religious matters while recognizing and respecting the decisive role played by Christianity in the structuring of European civilization and in the History of Portugal.” (Chega 2019). Ventura was asked about this statement in an interview to the *Público* newspaper in January 2021 against the background of the presidential elections. Here, again, he argued for the existence of a European Christian historical matrix and against the risk of letting the Muslim population increase (Público 2021).

The Portuguese case is again to be understood in a broader European context and as part of the phenomenon of nativism, an ideology that combines nationalism and xenophobia (Mudde 2007: 18–19). Here, the medieval past emerges as a time of confrontation, conflict, and violence, that is, reproducing the *topos* of the clash of civilizations, which in this case is turned into something positive and even a lesson (Kaufmann and Sturtevant 2020). It is thus invoked as a time when Christians fought and defeated Muslims—a point of reference and model for today’s world. The fact that medieval war is, at the same time, a reference for wrongdoing and right-doing, that is, a symbol of disorder and chaos on the one hand, and of the foundation of nationhood on the other, shows once again the abiding complexity and mutability of the idea of the Middle Ages (Lynch 2016: 149).

Comparisons with Spain are particularly relevant for its proximity to Portugal. In September 2004, former prime minister José María Aznar delivered a speech at Georgetown University in which he explained the Madrid terrorist attacks earlier that year as a new episode of a centuries-old conflict that he traced back to the eighth century and that had allegedly led to the beginning of what he presented as a successful *Reconquista* process (Aznar 2004: min. 18:40), a persisting trope in Spanish political discourse and Spanish historiography (García-Sanjuán 2020; Ríos Saloma 2011 & 2013). Aznar and his right-wing Partido Popular’s entangled use of the Middle Ages as a reference, simultaneously, of wrong- and right-doing from the early twenty-first century was amplified in 2013 when some party members defected and founded a new, far-right political formation, VOX. These members argued that Spain

was a nation forged by the victorious struggle of the Christians against the Muslims. VOX makes constant reference to figures such as the eighth-century legendary hero Pelayo and the fifteenth-century Catholic Monarchs, who respectively defeated the Muslims in the Battle of Covadonga and the War of Granada—which are traditionally regarded as the beginning and end of the so-called *Reconquista* (Ballester Rodríguez 2021; García-Sanjuán 2018; Ferreira 2019: 87). Several other examples at the European level can be compared with Portugal. In Hungary, the 2011 Constitution (rev. 2016) clearly states, “We are proud that our king Saint Stephen built the Hungarian State on solid grounds and made our country part of Christian Europe one thousand years ago” (Constitution of Hungary 2011). In other territories, calls for the “Reconquest” and the “Crusades” have been constant in recent years, especially in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Similarly, the description of the Middle Ages as a period of “clash of civilizations” between Christianity and Islam has become increasingly popular in recent French political discourse. *Rassemblement National*, for example, has persistently used the figure of Charles Martel and the associated eighth-century Battle of Poitiers (Blanc and Naudin 2015). Other political players have followed a similar trend. In October 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech against radical Islam and used the term “re-conquer,” signaling that the French Republic should be retaken from Islamic forces (France 24 2020). In December 2021, the far-right pundit and candidate for the 2022 presidential election Éric Zemmour launched a political party named *Reconquête* (“Reconquest”), promising that his eventual victory would represent “a reconquest of the greatest country in the world” (Euroactiv 2021).

Beyond nativism, other forms of the contradictory and ambivalent use of the Middle Ages can be discerned in current European political discourse. In the UK, the conservative politician and then-mayor of London Boris Johnson spoke to the London Assembly in January 2014 on the subject of riots, arguing that police should use more assertive tactics against rioters and suggested: “You get medieval immediately on these people and you come down much harder, and you don’t allow a mentality to arise of sheer wanton criminality” (Barrett 2014). This statement has a two-sided meaning. On the one hand, there is the negative view of the Middle Ages as a time of violence and confrontation. But at the same time, Johnson regards this as a useful and much-needed strategy, turning “medieval” brutality into something positive or, at least, necessary.

Finally, the ambivalent use of the Middle Ages can convey downright contradictory meanings, especially when considering a specific political player or party and their evolution over time or when comparing different contexts. In other words, the same political actor or

a specific party can make a different use of the Middle Ages depending on the objective for which they make use of this historical period. Thus, they can present a positive vision of the Middle Ages to defend a certain proposal and a negative vision in a different setting. Contradictory views of the Middle Ages within a political party are showcased by the German AfD, which frequently invokes a negative view of the Middle Ages when discussing issues such as immigration or Islam. However, the AfD also harbors a certain “positive” view of the Middle Ages in the context of the public debate on climate change; specifically, it puts forth the “Medieval Warm Period” theory in order to deny climate change, for instance in its 2016 manifesto for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland 2016). The Middle Ages thus becomes a double-edged sword but, in any case, a sharp weapon ready to be used.

Discussion

Our research results attest the frequent use of the medieval past in contemporary political discourse, both in the Portuguese and the wider European contexts. Three common features can be identified: the presence of three different views on the Middle Ages; frequent invocations of the medieval past when it comes to issues that have a strong impact on the outcome of elections, such as migration; and the recourse to this discursive strategy at local, regional, and national levels. These results, in turn, raise several issues concerning ideology, intentionality, effectiveness, and continuity.

Ideology

Over last two decades, scholars aligned with the APD perspective have redefined ideology as the “social representations that define the social identity of a group, that is, its shared beliefs about its fundamental conditions and ways of existence and reproduction, basis of the social representations shared by members of a group” (van Dijk 1998 & 2007). Based on this definition, it can be argued that the use of the medieval past in contemporary political discourses transcends ideological boundaries; the same medieval-derived *topoi*, historical figures, or processes mutate or metamorphose to serve one or another ideology, and medieval heritage sites become the stage from which politicians with different ideologies link the present to both the past and the future. From this prominent lectern they look back towards a glorious past with which they identify and, at the same time, look forward to an equally brilliant future of which they will be the great architects (Carpegna Falconieri 2019:

105; D’Arcens 2016: 4; Terlouw 2021). In addition, the broad notion of ideology, which suggests that the beliefs of the members of a group are built upon a small set of “core” or “foundational” notions, helps to explain contradictory invocations of the Middle Ages within the same ideology.

However, it needs to be considered that although the use of the medieval past is fertile ground for political players of all stripes, the Right is more prone to political medievalism than the Left. This tendency is visible not only in Europe but also in other contexts, notably the United States (Holsinger 2007; Elliott 2017: 78–105). Still, the examples provided in this article demonstrate that this tendency tends to give more positive than negative views of the Middle Ages, probably owing to the widespread notion of the “Middle Ages” as a static, traditional, and nonprogressive period and thus more likely to be praised by the right wing of the political spectrum (Carpegna Falconieri 2019: 88–89).

The three political takes on the Middle Ages that we have identified involve constant misinterpretation, stereotyping, and bias about the medieval past, either through direct or indirect references. To what extent can we regard these strategies as intentional? Are they effective? To answer these questions, it is necessary to evaluate the sources, that is, we need to ask where such uses of the Middle Ages come from.

Intentionality

When investigating to what extent these strategies are intentional, it is useful to consider Andrew Elliott’s (2017) idea of “banal medievalism,” which follow the concepts of “banality of evil” (Arendt 1963) and “banal nationalism” (Billig 1995). Banal medievalism refers to all uses of the Middle Ages that do not involve any clear, direct references to the historical period by actors that are not consciously aware of it, or, alternatively, not actively thinking about it. There is no doubt that many political players belong in the category of banal medievalism. The reasons for this go beyond the (limited) spontaneity of their speeches or their deliberate attempt to resort to phrases or expressions commonly used in society.

Popular culture and media are crucial factors to evaluate the *raison d’être* of banal medievalism in politics. Two examples from the cinematic sphere may illustrate this. First, the release of the film *Braveheart* has been widely discussed as an agent behind the rise of Scottish nationalism (Neidert 2013). Second, the expression “to get medieval” is from Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, where the character Marsellus, after being raped, says to his attacker: “I’m a get medieval on your ass.” After the film’s release, the expression

entered the English lexicon and is now used in different contexts, one of which is political discourse.

Banal medievalism could play, therefore, a role in terms of intentionality. We could also investigate non-spontaneous acts and deliberate strategies. This involves considering the role played by history in the various European education systems. In many instances, politicians have a limited knowledge of history, or their education has been guided by old historiographical assumptions and outdated ways to teach medieval history. Thus, in Portugal, some of the candidates in the 2021 presidential elections had been educated during the Estado Novo dictatorship and others already in the democratic period, although they all share a view about the medieval period based on prejudice, anachronism, and stereotypes. In other instances, politicians have an educational background in the humanities and a deep understanding of history, sometimes even of medieval history. Nevertheless, the degree of intentionality is very difficult to measure and demonstrate. Also, it is important to bear in mind that intentionality—difficult to observe—is as important as interpretation, understood here as the reaction by the recipients of the political message (van Dijk 2006: 127–128). What is really at stake is the interpretation of the messages conveyed and, more broadly, the effectiveness of the political discursive strategies deployed.

Effectiveness

To examine effectiveness, the four criteria used by DHA come into play: (theoretical) truth, (expressive) truthfulness, normative correctness, and comprehensibility (Reisigl 2017). In such an analysis, what is at stake is not so much the veracity of the words, expressions, or ideas used. Twentieth-century scholars such as Ernst Cassirer have already pointed out that the concept of truth was meaningless concerning political and national myths because their power rested in their effectiveness and capacity to provide political legitimation (Cassirer 1979; Kluver 1997).

Several effectiveness indicators can be used for the issue at hand. First, success in the process of democratic access to power. Several European examples can be wielded. Over the last two decades, Alex Salmond took the Scottish nationalists from being a marginal party in the late twentieth century to leading the independence movement and reaching the Scottish government. In Portugal, the four most voted candidates (Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, Ana Gomes, André Ventura, and João Ferreira) (nearly 90% in aggregate) in the 2021 presidential elections were also those that referenced the medieval past before and during

the campaign most openly and profusely. Among them, the case of André Ventura and *Chega* deserves further attention. This recently created party entered the Portuguese parliament for the first time in 2019, becoming the first far-right party to gain a foothold in parliament in Portuguese democratic history (Fernandes and Magalhães 2020). Since then, the party's popularity and support in opinion polls have grown, which would later materialize in the 2021 presidential elections, where the party's fast-rising leader André Ventura secured third place with 11.9 percent of the vote.

The case of *Chega* in Portugal might be analyzed together with that of VOX in Spain. In 2018, VOX won twelve seats in the Andalusian regional parliament, becoming the first far-right party to enter Spanish institutions since the end of Francoism (García-Sanjuán, 2020). The following year, it entered the national parliament and became the third largest political force in Spain. The 2019 electoral successes of both *Chega* and VOX, therefore, marked a decisive turn in the Iberian political scenario, which was until then an exception in European politics as far as the electoral success of far-right parties is concerned (Mendes and Dennison 2021).

These two Iberian countries display the effectiveness of political communication strategies based on uses of the medieval past according to another criterion: transcendence. In this sense, steadfast invocations of the *Reconquista* by political players both in Spain and Portugal—eager to anchor their ideas, proclamations, and electoral proposals in the glorious and exemplary medieval Iberian past which they intend to continue—has in recent years transcended the Iberian context and gained a much broader appeal. As such, the notion of *Reconquista* has become a global ideological reference for far-right parties and movements and has even been used to justify violent attacks such as those in Norway in 2011 and New Zealand in 2019 (García-Sanjuán 2022a & 2022b).

The effectiveness of these discursive strategies can also be explained by the way they reinforce existing collective identities, here understood as imagined communities (Anderson 1983: 6). In some territories such as Catalonia, Scotland, and Northern Italy, defined by Kees Terlouw as “thick regional identities” (Terlouw 2012), it could be argued that these discourse strategies link their thin future-oriented regional identity with a thick identity rooted in medieval history. Furthermore, the effectiveness of these political communication strategies as far as collective identities are concerned resides in the fact that they contribute to the exclusion of “others” (Wodak and Boukala 2015). Medieval myths, legends, figures, and episodes have been successfully used by political actors to identify both themselves and

society at large with the historical narratives they regard to be most suitable to promote inclusive or exclusive societies.

Interestingly, this effectiveness on collective identities is not a given at the EU level. Despite the multiple initiatives carried out by the European Union to construct a European identity in the twentieth century, this identity was challenged in the turn of the twenty-first century (Castells 1998: 369; Geary 2002: 1–14). Two decades later, the effective construction of a European identity seems even further away due to processes such as Brexit or ongoing mass migration (Elliott 2020). A study of the contribution that medieval references in political discourse made to the processes that have undermined the collective consciousness of Europeans is certainly necessary.

Another criterion to assess the effectiveness of this type of political communication strategy is its impact on political legitimacy. On the one hand, it seems necessary to consider the legitimation of power, here understood as a multidimensional concept that combines three main levels: the extent to which power conforms to established rules; how those rules can be justified in terms of beliefs shared by the rulers and the ruled; and evidence of expressed consent by the ruled to the rulers (Beetham 1991). Specifically, the use of the medieval past by political players might help to accomplish the second dimension of legitimacy—the one concerning shared beliefs—that is, to what an extent a regime, a political system, or some other power relation can be justified in terms of popular beliefs (Beetham 1991: 11).

In this regard, what is being dealt with here is a kind of legitimacy that derives from authoritative internal sources, which is belief in tradition and cultural legacy (Beetham 1991: 70). According to medievalist Sarah Pearce (2019), “by creating a revised version of medieval history, modern politicians can lead their supporters to believe that there is greater historical precedent for their ideas—racist or otherwise—than there ever really was.” It does not matter if the tradition, cultural legacy, and historical roots conveyed by political players in power are the product of a revised or manipulated version of the medieval past as long as they are proved to leave a strong and lasting trace. Moreover, in the case of far-right political players, historical references to a glorious medieval past need to be analyzed jointly with invocations to other strong traditional values, such as family and Catholicism. Together, they compound a legacy that is old and solid enough to justify strong opposition and action against relevant social movements and demands active today in Europe, such as the LGBTQ+ movement or feminism (Rodríguez-Temiño and Almansa-Sánchez 2021).

On the other hand, political legitimacy that relies on specific shared beliefs might be considered not only to assess a regime, a political system, or any other kind of power relation, but also investigate the legitimacy of political players who are not in power but are trying to access it. Legitimacy achieved through shared beliefs might play an important role in attempts to access power, something that can be illustrated by the rapid growth and access to power of far right-wing parties in southern Europe.

Continuity

The results of the present study suggest that the twenty-first century political instrumentalization of the Middle Ages shows a certain degree of continuity with the twentieth century. Continuity is actively sought in some cases, whereas in others the extent to which politicians are aware of their intellectual heritage and discursive strategies seems more difficult to quantify. In Portugal, for instance, the anachronistic reference to the period of 1383–1385 by João Ferreira, leader of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), closely follows the vision promoted by prominent party figures of the twentieth century, such as Álvaro Cunhal and António Borges Coelho (Neves 2008: 319–323, 333–335). In turn, continuity with Estado Novo dictatorship propaganda is obvious in President Rebelo de Sousa's discourse. Significantly, he is the son of Baltasar Rebelo de Sousa, former minister during the dictatorship and colonial governor.

In other European countries, similar instances of continuity can also be attested. Examples of this are Matteo Salvini's references to the legendary Alberto da Giussano, when he refounded the Lega Nord in 2018, and those made by Marine le Pen in continuation of her father's use of medieval figures such as Charles Martel and Joan of Arc, as well as his anti-Islamic rhetoric and championing of a Christian France. Similarly, European leaders make multiple references to warn of the risk of a new dark age or to proclaim the need to protect Christian Europe and Christian civilization. These discursive strategies were used by famous leaders during the twentieth century, such as Winston Churchill, for example in the well-known speech delivered on 18 June 1940 at the House of Commons (Churchill 1940). Let us remember that Boris Johnson, who, as previously noted, frequently resorts to similar formulas, published a book on Churchill (Johnson 2014).

Conclusion

The political instrumentalization of the medieval past in Portugal should be understood as part of a broader European process that goes far beyond ideology itself and cuts across the main political tribes. Furthermore, the value of this discursive strategy does not reside in its veracity nor in the greater or lesser degree of intentionality or awareness on the part of the political actors who use that rhetorical device. Rather, the importance of this discursive strategy lies, above all, in its effectiveness, illustrated by the success of political campaigns, the access to power, and the achievement of legitimacy by political actors. Future research on other forms of political discourse, such as media discourse on political issues and discourse produced by civil society actors, will undoubtedly provide more data and empirical evidence with which to compare the results of this study.

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