

# Sociology's Quest for the Middle Ages

*by Quentin Verreyken*

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**Alexis Fontbonne sets out to study the Middle Ages as a sociologist, laying the foundations for a stimulating critical approach that invites us to reconsider not only historical practice, but also the tools of sociology.**

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Reviewed: Alexis Fontbonne, *Introduction à la sociologie médiévale*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2023. 360 pp., €26.

At first glance, the aim of this *Introduction à la sociologie médiévale* [An Introduction to Medieval Sociology]—to open up the Middle Ages to sociology—may seem surprising. After all, for close to a century now in France, medieval studies—the historical discipline that studies the Middle Ages—has been structured around a broadening of its disciplinary scope to include the social sciences. This is evidenced by the journal *Annales*, founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, which since 1994 has carried the subtitle *Histoire, Sciences Sociales* [History, Social Sciences]. Sociologists such as Max Weber and Norbert Elias are widely cited in historical works, and are now counted among the key authors whom students of history encounter at one time or another.

And yet, as Alexis Fontbonne shows in the first chapter of his book, a closer look reveals that the relationship between the Middle Ages and sociology is far from clear-cut. On the one hand, it is not uncommon for medievalists to neglect sociology and its terminology, or to make superficial use of it, treating it as a toolbox from which

to pick and choose concepts, with little concern for their theoretical coherence. On the other hand, the medieval period barely features in the sociology syllabus, which is necessarily focused on contemporary society, to the extent that very few of today's sociologists are interested in the Middle Ages.

In his book, Alexis Fontbonne sets out to reconcile the historical study of the Middle Ages with the sociological approach, by mapping out a “medieval sociology”. The author, a specialist in the history of religious representations in the Middle Ages<sup>1</sup>, has crafted a handbook combining theoretical discussions with practical examples. He wishes to “provide historians and sociologists with a foundation for the sociology of the Middle Ages” (p. 21) by providing them with a range of concepts, data and avenues for reflection.

## **From the Middle Ages of sociologists...**

To lay the groundwork for this transdisciplinary dialogue, Alexis Fontbonne begins by pointing out in Chapter 2 sociology's debt to the Middle Ages. A number of authors considered to be founding figures of sociology (Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu) were indeed interested in the medieval period, whether to identify certain constitutive features of Western civilization (in particular the role of the Church in the organization of society), or to develop certain notions thanks to the “distance required for sociological reflection” (p. 92) offered by the Middle Ages. One example is Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, which he developed by first focusing on the religious field and the medieval Church<sup>2</sup>.

Identifying sociology's “medieval matrix” enables the author to discuss how recent historical works can in turn shed new light on classical sociology (Chapter 3). To take the example of Pierre Bourdieu, he defines heresy in relation to the position of actors in the religious field. In other words, a heretic is someone who stands in opposition to the orthodoxy of dogma. However, the historiography of the last twenty years has considerably nuanced this vision, by showing that it is first and foremost the

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis Fontbonne, *Histoire sociale de l'Esprit Saint en Occident : de l'amour divin à l'aumône laïque (XI<sup>e</sup>-XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Paris, Beauchesne, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, « Genèse et structure du champ religieux », *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 12, n° 3, 1971, pp. 295-334.

Church itself that constructs heresy by attributing to heretics practices and characteristics that are often infamous.

Alexis Fontbonne's aim, however, is not simply to highlight this or that error of sociological interpretation that has since been revised by historians; on the contrary, he invites us to reconsider certain traditional notions of sociology in the light of advances in historical research—for example, by abandoning the concept of the religious field in favor of that of the “ecclesial field” in order to better understand the relationship between the Church and the medieval social world. Indeed, for Bourdieu, the religious field in the Middle Ages was conflated with the Church, conceived above all as a bureaucratic institution and a space of struggle between agents competing “to define the Church and monopolize its representation” (p. 127), which ultimately proved to be a somewhat limited point of view. On the other hand, to speak of an ecclesial field shifts the focus to the *ecclesia*, i.e. not only the Church as an institution, but also the community of believers (both clerics and laity). This allows us to raise further questions about the Church's control “over all the dimensions of the social world” (p. 131), by paving the way for fascinating interrogations on the co-extensiveness and reciprocal influences between the ecclesial field and the social world.

## **to the sociology of the Middle Ages**

Once his preliminary critical work has demonstrated the fruitfulness of a dialogue between medievalists and sociologists, Alexis Fontbonne turns to the main point of his book: to lay the foundations for a sociology of the Middle Ages. In doing so, the author is not seeking to construct a new theory or a perfectly formulated method. His *Introduction à la sociologie médiévale* is first and foremost a practical handbook, which presents a number of case studies.

He begins Chapter 4 by debunking certain preconceived ideas about the Middle Ages that could undermine sociological analysis of the period: a pre-capitalist feudal world in which the logic of economic domination was absent, a Christian age characterized by madmen and poverty, an absence of rationality, and so forth. While this part of the book may appear to labor the point for medievalists, it is primarily intended for students of sociology, to help them shed certain preconceptions and thus “change their way of thinking” (p. 192). It is clearly beyond the scope of this book to

cover every aspect of the medieval period, and the numerous footnotes to a wealth of scientific literature are most welcome. Nevertheless, as an introductory manual, sociology students may wish that the book had included more references to major summaries and reference works on the Middle Ages (particularly in the final bibliography), to better guide their preliminary reading<sup>3</sup>.

In Chapter 5, Alexis Fontbonne looks at several examples of how sociological concepts have been applied to the historical study of the Middle Ages. Beginning with a lengthy review of the various uses of sociology in historical research in the twentieth century, he inevitably touches on a few relatively conventional cases, such as the founding of the *Annales* and the debates, in the 1980s and 1990s, on the medieval origins of the modern state. Of the many more recent lines of research he discusses, the author seems most at ease when addressing his own research themes, namely the study of the ecclesiastical world. The section on the dynamics of domination in the rural and seigniorial world is also very informative, although one might have liked to see more of the most recent works—and there are many—on the use of violence in the Middle Ages.

## Betraying the clergy

The final part of the book starts from the observation that it would be impossible to study the Middle Ages as a sociologist without also considering those who, in turn, produced knowledge about the period. Beginning with the people of the Middle Ages themselves, who were quite capable of reflecting on the world around them (Chapter 6). Among these “medieval sociologists,” the author focuses primarily on clerics who developed an ecclesiological discourse, in other words a discourse of the Church about itself and the world. As Alexis Fontbonne so clearly demonstrates, this was a “believing sociology,” as it found divine explanations for the organization and hierarchies of the social world, and was therefore the bearer of a prescriptive message. Taking into account this ecclesiological discourse on the world therefore also means

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<sup>3</sup> As a starting point, see for example Joseph Morsel, with the collaboration of Christine Ducourtieux, *L'Histoire (du Moyen Âge) est un sport de combat... Réflexions sur les finalités de l'Histoire du Moyen Âge destinées à une société dans laquelle même les étudiants d'histoire s'interrogent*, Laboratoire de médiévistique occidentale de Paris, 2007.

that researchers must “betray the clerics” (p. 311), considering their words as primarily revealing their own social position.

To extend the author's statement, would we then venture to say that to study the Middle Ages as a sociologist, we must also betray the medievalists? Alexis Fontbonne stops short of saying this, when he finally presents the perspective of a sociological analysis of medieval historians (chap. 7). Today, the study of the conditions under which scientific knowledge is produced is a research field in its own right in the history and sociology of science, which until now has paid little attention to medievalists, no doubt because they represent a less well-known or prestigious community than, for example, mathematicians, philosophers or physicists. Yet for many years now, medievalists have been actively reflecting on their profession and working conditions, which have had a considerable influence on their work: take, for example, the current widespread model of project-based research funding (the European Research Council and, in France, the National Research Agency, etc.), which encourages competition between researchers and is an obstacle to exploratory and long-term research<sup>4</sup>.

Sociological observation of medieval society can therefore be pursued in a variety of ways. By characterizing the three “assets” of medievalism (bibliography, auxiliary sciences, social sciences), it is possible to highlight certain logics of progression, such as the fact that mastery of auxiliary sciences (diplomacy, paleography, numismatics, etc.) is valued in the context of the doctorate, but is of no use in the competitive *agrégation* teaching examination. Quantitative analysis of the population of researchers and their work, based on the directory of the Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public [Society of Medieval Historians in Higher Education], offers an insight into the geographical distribution of medievalists (33% of whom work in the Île-de-France region), the degree of female representation in the profession (42% women), and the over-representation of certain research areas, starting with the Church and religion. It should be noted that the framework considered here is solely that of French research and academia, with its own distinctive logics. It would be equally valuable to consider the community of medievalists as a heterogeneous international whole, where not only scientific cultures but also career strategies and working conditions vary greatly from country to country. As the author himself points out, however, this chapter is first and foremost

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<sup>4</sup> Matthieu Hubert, Séverine Louvel, « Le financement sur projet : quelles conséquences sur le travail des chercheurs ? », *Mouvements*, vol. 71, n° 3, 2012, pp. 13-24; Étienne Anheim, *Le travail de l'histoire*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018.

a “blueprint for research,” and it is therefore easy to see why he has chosen to focus initially on the question of French medievalists.

This ambitious and extremely stimulating *Introduction à la sociologie médiévale* successfully demonstrates the value of medieval sociology, offering readers plenty of food for thought. It is worth noting that, because of his own research themes, Alexis Fontbonne places particular emphasis on the Church and the religious question in his book, whereas other themes that lend themselves equally well to sociological analysis are dealt with relatively little, such as the history of justice and violence. On the other hand, we could hardly criticize the author for basing his work on his own field of specialization, especially as he repeatedly states his intention to open up targeted areas of research rather than striving for an illusory exhaustiveness. Nevertheless, it is surprising that historical sociology and what it teaches us about the Middle Ages are not discussed in greater depth, except through the tutelary figures of Max Weber and Norbert Elias. A valuable contemporary addition would have been the American sociologist Charles Tilly, whose work on the genesis of the modern state and on social movements has had a considerable influence on the study of medieval uprisings in recent years. Despite these few bibliographical anomalies, one can only appreciate the very rich perspectives offered by this book, and hope that they will inspire many more medieval sociologists in the future (and vice versa).

#### Further reading:

- Étienne Anheim, *Le travail de l'histoire*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018.
- *Être historien du Moyen Âge au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle : XXXVIII<sup>e</sup> Congrès de la SHMESP*, Paris : Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2008.
- Frédérick Guillaume Dufour, *La sociologie historique. Tradition, trajectoires et débats*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2015.
- Norbert Elias, *Moyen Âge et procès de civilisation*, with an introduction by Étienne Anheim, Paris, EHESS, 2021.
- Pierre-Anne Forcadet, « La justice et les sources judiciaires à l'aune des sciences sociales : individuation, agentivité et subjectivation », *Revue historique de droit français et étranger*, vol. 98, n° 3, 2020, pp. 287-314.
- Joseph Morsel, with the collaboration of Christine Ducourtieux, *L'Histoire (du Moyen Âge) est un sport de combat... Réflexions sur les finalités de l'Histoire du*

Moyen Âge destinées à une société dans laquelle même les étudiants d'histoire s'interrogent, Laboratoire de médiévistique occidentale de Paris, 2007.

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