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9 1843 - stories of an extraordinary world

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11 HOW WE LIVE NOW  
12 Visors and violence: we are returning to the Middle Ages  
13 Even before the new plague arrived, modernity seemed to be in retreat

14  
15 1843  
16 Sep 14th 2020 edition  
17 Sep 14th 2020  
18 BY ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE

19  
20 Don Quixote sees phantoms of the Middle Ages wherever he goes. Roadside inns are castles, vagabonds are knights in shining armour and windmills are giants to be jousting with. I often feel the same way myself these days. Shop assistants wear visors shaped like see-through helmets and shelter behind Perspex sheets that look like transparent shields.

21  
22 This is perhaps as it should be: the Middle Ages was a time of plagues. The Roman Empire was felled as much by viruses as barbarians. The Black Death of the 1340s killed more than 40% of Europe's population (which puts our little problem into perspective). The rich fled the cities to hunker down in the countryside ("The Decameron" by Giovanni Boccaccio is a collection of tales narrated by people sheltering outside Florence from the plague). A new artistic genre, the Danse Macabre, told the story of the universality of death. Flagellant religious orders whipped themselves in the hope that the pain would ward off the Last Judgment.

23  
24 Now we are witnessing the return of many medieval pathologies. Millenarianism is on the march again. Extinction Rebellion activists close down cities and daub town squares with fake blood in protests that usually involve wild dancing and drumming along with predictions of the end of the world. The new high-tech Middle Ages is even seeing the return of medieval political nomenclature. Kings were once called the Bald (Charles) or the Cruel (Peter of Castile). Donald Trump now dubs his opponents Sleepy Joe or Crooked Hillary.

25  
26 There are structural similarities too - similarities that began long before covid-19 took hold and raise worrying questions about our post-covid future. The middle class that was the bulwark of the post-war world is on the retreat across the west. The new tech oligarchy resembles the medieval aristocracy, "the chivalrous class without the chivalry", as Joel Kotkin wrote in a recent book, "The Coming of Neo-Feudalism".

27  
28 Its members live in gated communities or isolated enclaves protected from the rest of society. They socialise with each other at global festivals but seldom have any contact with those who inhabit unfashionable areas such as flyover country in America (the parts of the country most Americans only ever see from the air), or the north of England. Large armies of "retainers" wear their livery, in the form of t-shirts or baseball hats emblazoned with logos, and do their bidding.

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30  
31 The academic elite looks more like the medieval clergy by the day. Universities and university towns are latter-day monasteries that protect their members from contamination by hoi polloi. Academics engage in the modern equivalent of scholastic debates: rather than discussing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin they discuss whether sex is a social construct (the answer: of course).

32  
33 Rather than contain a multitude of thought, these latter-day clerics are obsessed with sin in the form of racism and sexism and dole out fearsome punishments to sinners. Those who venture outside a narrow range of permissible opinion are excommunicated from society, publicly flayed on Twitter and forced to live in the intellectual equivalent of medieval forests.

34  
35 These gated communities and medieval monasteries are surrounded by an expanding class of serfs and beggars. The serfs exist at the beck and call of the tech and clerical elites - they drive their cars, deliver their food and clean their houses. But rather than being tied to particular people or plots of land they are just-in-time workers on zero-hours contracts who are tethered to an algorithm. The serfs pick their way through the crowds of beggars, living in tent cities and subsisting on the cast-offs of the wider society.

36

37 police officers look increasingly like Don Quixote's knights. This is particularly so  
in America, the country that is leading the charge back to the Middle Ages despite  
having never experienced the Middle Ages itself. People there wear helmets to protect  
themselves from rocks, special vests to ward off bullets, and pads on their elbows and  
knees. They are weighed down by all sorts of heavy equipment – radios, flashlights and,  
of course, guns. They sometimes ride on horses, like knights of old, but are more  
likely to choose armoured Humvees, or even tanks.

38  
39 Despite all this heavy armour, the police are losing control of the streets. One of the  
signature achievements of modernity was the creation of the nation state which could  
claim a monopoly of violence within its borders. The state is once again losing the  
battle against feudal gangs of various sorts. In London, knife-crime is becoming so  
common that it can't be long before people wear swords and scabbards. In many of  
America's great cities the police have left inner-city areas to look after themselves.  
Downtown Portland is ruled by gangs of activists who wear medieval armour of their own  
and engage in regular – and highly ritualised – jousts with police.

40  
41 The most striking similarity, though, is the distance between image and reality. The  
people of the Middle Ages talked about chivalry and the Glory of God but lived in a  
brutal world in which gangs mugged each other and monks engaged enthusiastically in all  
the sins of the flesh. Today's elite talk constantly about "inclusion" and "win-win"  
situations but have created a world in which the spoils go to a tiny minority, and more  
and more people are cast into the wilderness. The inferno beckons.■

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