MEDIEVALISM AND MODERNITY: ARCHITECTURAL APPROPRIATIONS OF THE MIDDLE AGES IN GERMANY (1890–1920)*

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The present article questions practices of medievalism and representations of the Middle Ages. In order to understand these practices and representations, we have to take into account, on the one hand, a general narrative of the construction of Middle Ages during the long nineteenth century and, on the other, the final breakdown of classical medievalism and its impact on the cultural evolution of the first decades of the twentieth century. Because our primary interest is the relationship between medievalism and modernity, it makes sense to concentrate on this latter period. Of course, during the whole nineteenth century, medievalism was linked to political, social and cultural changes that took place within the process of modernization. The completions of the Cologne cathedral, the long-term enterprise of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, and the restoration of the château de Pierrefonds were powerful symbols of the ideology of progress which dominated the century in Europe. In a certain sense, medievalism and the idea of modernity were often closely linked. Many advocates of medievalism attempted to bring medieval order and forms into the present. They took inspiration from the Middle Ages to shape their here and now. But since the 1890s, the relation between representations of the medieval past and modernity began to change profoundly. History, framing the views of the century, shaped the knowledge and modified the self-understanding of European societies, and was increasingly forced to confront the crisis of historicism. The acceleration of uncontrolled urban development resulting from the industrial boom created strong social tensions and undermined the ideology of progress. In the field of literature, arts and architecture, these evolutions prepared the field for avant-garde movements.

The passage from affirmative historicism to modernity implied a development requiring a period of time and took different forms. It was neither

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a sudden transformation nor a linear process, but rather a complex evolution, including backward steps and numerous intertwining entanglements. As I will argue, this mutation can be observed in several spheres of social and cultural life. In the following remarks I will concentrate on architecture and on the ideas of “building,” but similar phenomena might be observed in applied arts (furniture, interior design) or in popular literature. However, as we will see, architecture offers special evidence to illustrate the argument I am trying to defend.

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Let us begin with a preliminary remark on our understanding of historicism. What we call historicism (Historismus) is a movement which started in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. It was related, as stated by Koselleck, to the historical experience of the French Revolution, which radically questioned the foreseeability of history. From then on, past, present and future were separated. Without commenting here further on the methodological implications for the historiography (in particular source criticism, necessity for not assessing the past in light of the present), I would like to define historicism, for the purposes of my presentation, in the term of Otto-Gerhard Oexle, as a movement of Historisierung (historization) encompassing all areas of humanities, arts and sciences. This overlapping definition includes all disciplines. However, in art history and the history of architecture the term historicism describes, more specifically, the use of historical styles (classical, Gothic, Romanesque, renaissance, baroque) by artists and architects of the nineteenth century. It assumes that these styles can be recognized by their basic features and can be transferred by imitation into the present. Normally one distinguishes between a romantic stage and a positivistic or “serious” or “scholarly” stage of historicism. The first reputedly appeals to the imagination, through the mind of the past, and might be conjured into the present as a kind of enchantment. It proceeds by a sort of Totalisierung of the traits and features it searches to discover in the past. Among the possible pasts it prefers the Middle Ages because it postulates their continuous development into the present time. The Middle Ages are considered as the origin and the cradle of its own

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