

JORGE MAJFUD

# NEOMEDIEVALISM

REFLECTIONS ON THE POST-ENLIGHTENMENT ERA



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ON THE POST-ENLIGHTENMENT ERA

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*Neomedievalism: Reflections on the Post-Enlightenment  
Era*

Translated by Bruce Campbell

1ª edición de 2018

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ISBN: 978-84-9134-317-2

Ilustración de la cubierta: Jorge Orrico  
Diseño de la cubierta: Celso Hernández de la Figuera

Publicacions de la Universitat de València  
<http://puv.uv.es>  
[publicacions@uv.es](mailto:publicacions@uv.es)

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## Introduction

### TOLERANCE IS THE WINE OF NATIONS

My father was the fourth or fifth child of twelve born in Uruguay to a Lebanese immigrant couple, she being Christian and he probably too. He lived his entire childhood in misery, digging up food from the field to eat, setting his bare feet in the cow manure to relieve the frosty early morning cold, fighting with other poor people for the bones discarded by the Tacuarembó slaughterhouse.

He was a schoolboy when he was already working with his siblings mixing mortar to make bricks or planting vegetables that later he would sell in town. As one brother would come home from school, the other would meet him at the entrance of the town in order to get his shoes to wear.

Eventually, at some point in the 1950s, my father successfully made his way to the capital city to study carpentry and radiotelephony and upon returning to his town started *Fabrica de Muebles* (Furniture Factory), as he called it, in addition to starting various businesses and founding a Rotary Club and some banking cooperatives, with some success. During the day he worked in his pharmacy or looked for some lost cow in one of his fields, and at night, for 30 years, he taught classes at the technical school. His colleagues laughed at his ability to fall asleep sitting or even standing up.

“If I could go back in life, I would work less and enjoy things more,” was one of the last things he told me on the

phone, not out of regret but to give me a new piece of advice, which ended up being his last. Our last conversation was lighthearted because one never knows the meaning of a moment.

One day after his funeral, as I walked through the old corners of the city of my past lives, as if taking my sadness out for a walk with the secret hope of losing it at some intersection, I crossed paths with many people, too many for the moment, most of whom I did not know or was not able to recognize after so many years. One of them told me: "I had the best time of my life when I worked for your father. The man knew how to set up projects in any city and we all went together."

"I was a student of your father," another gentleman, whom I did recognize from some years back, told me. "I was a lost boy when I met him. He gave me my first job and showed me how to be part of a team. If it wasn't for him I wouldn't be who I am today nor would I have the family that I have."

My perspective, like anybody's, is not neutral. In my view he was an austere man, generous with his own family and others, even though many would think the opposite. "For some people I am a good guy," he said, "and for others I am surely a wretch. You can't be okay with both God and the devil." It was not difficult to find faults in him, not because he emphasized this in some particular human way but because it is never difficult to find faults in others. If they say there was once a perfect guy, who went around preaching democratic love even for his enemies and they crucified him anyway, what do you expect?

This was even more evident in the world of ideological passions. We always argued about politics. He always clung to his conservative principles and I always insisted on a rebuttal. Our arguments were intense but we always resolved them in a simple way: "Well, I can see now that we

are not going to reach an agreement," he said, "let's go have some wine then."

Of course, someone might say that tolerance is not the wine but the opium of the people. It is no less true that its absence is the death of nations and, even worse, the frustration of each one of the concrete lives that make up that mythological abstraction.

I loved him a lot, like any good son can love a good father. But a son never loves as much as a father does. It takes a whole lifetime to come to this realization; some, even, need two lifetimes to understand it and one more to begin to accept it. So, you can go about discovering other meanings in old memories, each one more profound than the last.

For example, in several political elections, the old man listed himself on the ballot for his party. I never voted for him. I remember my first time, at the end of the 1980s, I voted for an emerging ecological party. When I arrived home I told my father that I had not voted for him. As always, he took the news with a smile and told me that I had done well.

Now that he has died, I ask myself what in the hell was the point of all my idealistic honesty on that one election day. What was the purpose of all that petty cruelty? What good was that petty truth, that questionable honesty?

What was the point of any of it? I ask myself this while I stare at a pile of a hundred letters written in Arabic that his parents wrote and received almost a century ago. I don't know what they say. I can only suspect that they are stories of love and heartbreak, of encounters and disagreements that my father never knew about because his family also hid from him their own frustrations, just as they hid from him all the secrets of a language that they only used in the depths of their two private lives in a small earthen house, in the middle of a field that belonged to someone else and barely provided for survival.

What was the point of it all? I ask myself again. Then I look at my son looking out the window as I liked to do while my father worked at more useful things and I realize that I know the answer. The answer, not the truth. Because duty, what should be, is one thing, and what simply is is something else. There is no doubt about one and about the other, about the truth, probably no one even knows its name.

## Radical Culture and Popular Culture

### WHAT GOOD IS CULTURE?

In 2006, in Lewisburg, Tennessee, a neighborhood group protested because the public library was investing resources in the purchase of books in Spanish. Of the sixty thousand volumes, only one thousand were published in a language other than English. The annual budget, totaling thirteen thousand dollars, dedicated the sum of one hundred and thirty dollars to the purchase of books in Spanish. The buying spree, representing one percent of the budget, enraged some of the citizens of Tennessee, causing them to take the issue to the authorities, arguing that a public service, sustained through taxes charged to the U.S. populace, should not promote something that might benefit illegal workers.

Thus, the new conception of culture surpasses that distant precept of the ancient library of Alexandria. That now almost completely forgotten library achieved the height of its development in second century Egypt. Its backward administrators had the custom of periodically sending investigators throughout the world in order to acquire copies of texts from the most distant cultures. Among its volumes there were copies of Greek, Persian, Indian, Hebrew and African texts. Almost all of those decade-long efforts were abruptly brought to an end, thanks to a fire caused by the enlightened ships of the emperor Julius Caesar. Nearly a thousand years later, another deliberately-set fire destroyed

the similarly celebrated library of Córdoba, Spain, founded by the caliph Al-Hakam (creator of the University and of free education for poor kids), where the passion for knowledge brought together Jews, Christians, and Muslims with texts from the most diverse cultures known in the period. Also in this period, the Spanish caliphs were in the habit of dispatching seekers throughout the world in order to expand the library's collection of foreign books. This library was also destroyed by a fanatic, al-Mansur, in the name of Islam, according to his own interpretation of the common good and superior morality.

In the past, military rulers of Latin American dictatorships (I grew up in one of them), to exacerbate honor and patriotism, tried to clean up the Spanish language, college education and culture itself from any foreign influence, starting with ideas (people in power frequently fear other's ideas, which is understandable; words are perceived as more dangerous than money and arms and, in fact, sometimes they are). For some reason they, as the Nazis and many other self-proclaimed democratic people did and do today, never realized that there is no idea, no tradition, no language, no religion, no race uncontaminated by foreigners. By definition, every human creation is historical, that is, is the result of a long evolution and, very frequently, of short and devastating involutions.

The Tennessee anecdote perhaps represents a minority in a vast and heterogeneous country (both "real Americans" and anti-Americans hate the most beautiful characteristic of this country: diversity). But it remains significant and representative of still millions of people, frequently exacerbated by some big media shows, a practice that was invented in Germany eighty years ago.

Significant and common is the idea, assumed in that anecdote, that the Spanish language is a foreign language, when any half-way educated person knows that almost one

hundred years before English, it was Spanish that was spoken in what today is the United States; that Spanish has been there, in many states of the Union for five centuries; that Spanish and Latino culture are neither foreign nor an insignificant minority: more than fifty million Hispanics live in the United States and the number of Spanish-speakers in the country is roughly equivalent to the number of Spanish speakers living in Spain. For many, the “real American” (another stereotype, as most of the “real” men and women are), often depicted as a kind of cowboy, actually derives from the Mexican vaquero (originally from the Arabic tradition, like most of the traditional West and Southwest architectural style) who left a strong mark on both legal and illegal immigrants from the eastern US. The dollar symbol, \$, is derived from the Spanish Peso (PS), the common currency until late 18th century—not to mention the Spanish Empire Flag, which is in the flag of some southern U.S. states. And so on, and so forth.

If those who become nervous because of the presence of that “new culture” had the slightest historical awareness, they would neither be nervous nor consider their neighbors to be dangerous foreigners. The only thing that historically has always been dangerous is ignorance, which is why the promotion of ignorance can hardly be considered synonymous with security and progress—even by association, as with the reigning method of propaganda, which consists of associating cars with women, tomatoes with civil rights, the victory of force and wealth with proof of the truth, or a million dollars with paradise.

According to French-American Thomas Jefferson, Spanish is a crucial language to an American. He read Don Quixote in its original language and recommended the study of both Spanish and French. However, as the revolutionary British Thomas Paine once said: “nothing can reach the heart that is steeled with prejudice.”

I am not so naïve as to think that today we could have intellectual politicians like the Founding Fathers, but at least it could be convenient to consider that myths, traditions, and popular history are written based on a convenient combination of memory and forgetfulness. Sometimes it helps to mitigate the pride of ignorance—and the fire as well.

### WHAT GOOD IS LITERATURE, ANYWAY?

I am sure that you have heard many times this loaded query: “Well, what good is literature, anyway?” almost always from a pragmatic businessman or, at worst, from a Goering of the day, one of those pseudo-demigods that are always hunched down in a corner of history, waiting for the worst moments of weakness in order to “save” the country and humankind by burning books and teaching men how to be “real” men. And, if one is a freethinking writer during such times, one gets a beating, because nothing is worse for a domineering man with an inferiority complex than being close to somebody who writes. Because if it is true that our financial times have turned most literature into a hateful contest with the leisure industry, the collective unconscious still retains the idea that a writer is an apprentice sorcerer going around touching sore spots, saying inconvenient truths, being a naughty child at naptime. And if his/her work has some value, in fact he/she is all that. Perhaps the deeper mission of literature during the last five centuries has been precisely those things. Not to mention the ancient Greeks, now unreachable for a contemporary human spirit that, like a running dog, has finally gotten exhausted and simply hangs by its neck behind its owner’s moving car.

However, literature is still there; being troublesome from the beginning, because to say its own truths it only needs a



modest pen and a piece of paper. Its greatest value will continue to be the same: not to resign itself to the complacency of the people nor to the temptation of barbarism. Politics and television are for that.

Every so often a politician, a bureaucrat or a smart investor decides to strangle the humanities with a cut in education, some culture ministry or simply downloading the full force of the market over the busy factories of prefabricated sensitivities.

Much more sincere are the gravediggers who look us in the eyes, and with bitterness or simple resentment, throw their convictions in our faces as if they were a single question: What good is literature?

Some wield this kind of philosophical question not as an analytical instrument but as a mechanical shovel, to slowly widen a tomb full of living corpses.

The gravediggers are old acquaintances. They live or pretend to live, but they are always clinging to the throne of time. Up or down, there they go repeating with voices of the dead their utilitarian superstitions about needs and progress.

How to respond about the uselessness of literature depends on what you comprehend to be useful and not on the literature itself. How useful is the epitaph, the tombstone carved, a reconciliation, sex with love, farewell, tears, laughter, coffee? How useful is football, television programs, photographs that are traded on social networks, racing horses, whiskey, diamonds, thirty pieces of Judas and the repentance?

There are very few who seriously wonder what good is football or the greed of Madoff. There are but a few people (or they have not had enough time) who question or wonder, "What good is literature?" Soccer and football are at best, naïve. They have frequently been accomplices of puppeteers and gravediggers.

Literature, if it has not been an accomplice of puppeteers, has just been literature. Its critics do not refer to the respectable business of bestsellers or of prefabricated emotions. No one has ever asked so insistently, "what good is good business?" Critics of literature, deep down, are not concerned with this type of literature. They are concerned with something else. They worry about literature.

The best Olympic athletes have shown us how much the human body may withstand. Formula One racers as well, although borrowing some tricks. The same with the astronauts who put their first steps on the moon, the shovel that builds also destroys.

The same way, the great writers throughout history have shown how far and deep human experience, (what really matters, what really exists) the vertigo of the highest and deepest ideas and emotions, can go.

For gravediggers only the shovel is useful. For the living dead too.

For others who have not forgotten their status as human beings who dare to go beyond the narrow confines of their own primitive individual experience, for the condemned who roam the mass graves but have regained the passion and dignity of human beings, for them it is literature.

Then, yes, we can say literature is good for many things. But, because we know that our inquisitors of the day are most interested in profits and benefits, we should remind them that a narrow spirit can hardly shelter a great intelligence. A great intelligence trapped within a narrow spirit sooner or later chokes. Or it becomes spiteful and vicious. But, of course, a great intelligence, spiteful and vicious, can hardly understand this. Much less, then, when it is not even a great intelligence.

HEAD-SHRINKING JOURNALISM

By the nineties, yet still in the twentieth century, I used to write for five or six hours at a time on a Czech typewriter I had bought for the price of scrap. I had found it at a Sunday fair called Tristan Narvaja, in Montevideo, something like the Madrid street fair FERIA del Rastro or some *marché aux Puces* in Paris. In that lonely student room that faced an alley in the Old City, I wrote and rewrote the same chapter of a novel four or five times. The hardest part was always reducing the number of words. At least, it was that part of the literary craft that consumed me the most. Nevertheless, I did it with passion, pleasure, and without any urgency, since at that time I did not write for a publication.

When I published my first novel, *Memorias de un desaparecido*, it was partly the result of the chaotic struggle between obsessions, superstitions, and personal hallucinations with the almost impossible phenomenon of communication in a phantasmagoric world, which normally is very significant for oneself but not for the rest. I am sure that if I have managed to communicate with others using or usurping the sacred art of literature, it was thanks to successive mutilations: communication of the deepest emotions only occurs in a narrow space between one's own follies and the particularities of others.

Thanks to this little novel, in a few months I met several young journalists whose friendship I retain to the present day. One day, one of them asked me to write an article on the subject of a conversation we had had, warning me that he only had space for just four thousand words. I never imagined that, for the misery of so many readers, that one would be the first article of many hundreds I have published to date. Occasionally I find that many of them have been republished in newspapers and magazines, sometimes erroneously signed by others. I usually just need to read two sentences to see if I or someone else wrote it, even when it is a fifteen-year-old article. I normally always excuse these

errors but I strongly object, with some success, when I find my name on items that I never wrote. It is not good to kidnap merits or take the blame for the follies of others.

At the end of the century, you could still find short articles of four or five thousand words in nonacademic publications. Soon I could feel, beyond just understanding, the educational benefit of reducing long essays to this number, which at first seemed so greedy.

Within the first three or four years of this century, publishers had modified their typical word count from 4,000 to 2,000. I remember a major Mexican newspaper that once returned my usual weekly article because it surpassed the limit of 1,800 words. They kindly suggested that I reduce it to that number. So I did, sure that brevity is a form of kindness, and continued publishing there and in other newspapers of the continent, which apparently felt more comfortable with the new format.

A few years later, the sacred number had shrunk to 1,200, which coincided again with the standard of the entire continent, and one or two years later it reached the milestone of one thousand words.

Not long ago, one of the world's most-read media outlets asked me on four separate occasions to reduce an article to 800 words. The first time, I sent an article of a thousand words. They said I should make an effort to trim it down to 850. I sent another 900-word piece, assuming some flexibility from them. Rejected. Normally, I would have given up on sending another version, but I was very interested in publishing the article in question because its subject matter was near and dear to me. Pained, I mutilated it again to make it 850 words. Naturally, it was published.

To date, the float level of op-eds walks the 800-word limit, and dis-counting.

Now, except for the brochures and pamphlets that fill our mailboxes every day and bestsellers sold by the kilogram,

this dramatic, unlimited reduction of texts in the current media is not due to a space issue, as in the times since the ancient Egyptians and Sumerians, for convent scribes, incunabula, heretics' hermeneutics, the French *encyclopédistes*, and all paper periodicals from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. It is due to the new reader.

I do not intend to propose *Being and Nothingness* by Sartre as a reading model, but I do recommend it at least as an intellectual exercise. The problem is that every day we have more writing to pay attention to. Almost all are distractions; nearly all are failed stimuli. We do not have more options than before; that is patently false. We just have more distractions and, consequently, more need to interrupt everything right after we start it.

But the day of every man and woman still has twenty-four hours. The same twenty-four hours a reader of Flaubert and Dostoyevsky, Kafka and Ernesto Sabato had. Therefore, we have the same time to deal with more things and get to the bottom of them.

I am afraid that this Jivaroan head-shrinking practice that affects literature is not due to the quality of the writings, but to the shortcomings of the new reader (apart from a blind pride and self-indulgency, almost always justified with the generational excuse that prevents them from expressing any self-criticism); not due to the art of synthesis but of mutilation.

I fear that this exercise of reduction will soon become an effort to stretch an idea down to 144 characters. Possibly just 10 or 20. Probably the New Thought movement could manage quite well with a couple of emoticons. :/

HUMANISM, THE WEST'S LAST GREAT UTOPIA

One of the characteristics of conservative thought throughout modern history has been to see the world as a collection of more or less independent, isolated, and incompatible compartments. In its discourse, this is simplified in a unique dividing line: God and the devil, us and them, the true men and the barbaric ones. In its practice, the old obsession with borders of every kind is repeated: political, geographic, social, class, gender, etc. These thick walls are raised with the successive accumulation of two parts fear and one part safety.

Translated into a postmodern language, this need for borders and shields is recycled and sold as micropolitics, which is to say, a fragmented thinking (propaganda) and a localist affirmation of social problems in opposition to a more global and structural vision of the Modern Era gone by.

These regions are mental, cultural, religious, economic and political, which is why they find themselves in conflict with humanistic principles that prescribe the *recognition of diversity* at the same time as an *implicit equality* on the deepest and most valuable level of the present chaos. On the basis of this implicit principle arose the aspiration to sovereignty of the states some centuries ago: even between two kings, there could be no submissive relationship; between two sovereigns there could only be *agreements*, not *obedience*. The wisdom of this principle was extended to the nations, taking written form in the first constitution of the United States. Recognizing common men and women as subjects of law ("*We the people...*") was the response to personal and class-based absolutisms, summed up in the outburst of Louis XIV, "*l'Etat c'est Moi.*" Later, the humanist idealism of the first draft of that constitution was relativized, excluding the progressive *utopia* of abolishing slavery.

Conservative thought, on the other hand, traditionally has proceeded in an inverse form: if the regions are all different, then there are some that are better than others. This last

observation would be acceptable for humanism if it did not contain explicitly one of the basic principles of conservative thought: our island, our bastion is always the best. Moreover: our region is the region chosen by God and, therefore, it should prevail at any price. We know it because our leaders receive in their dreams the divine word. Others, when they dream, are delirious.

Thus, the world is a permanent competition that translates into mutual threats and, finally, into war. The only option for the survival of the best, of the strongest, of the island chosen by God is to vanquish, annihilate the other. There is nothing strange in the fact that conservatives throughout the world define themselves as religious individuals and, at the same time, they are the principal defenders of weaponry, whether personal or governmental. It is, precisely, the only thing they tolerate about the State: the power to organize a great army in which to place all the honor of a nation. Health and education, in contrast, must be “personal responsibilities” and not a tax burden on the wealthiest. According to this logic, we owe our lives to the soldiers, not to the doctors, just like the workers owe their daily bread to the rich

At the same time that conservatives hate Darwin's *Theory of Evolution*, they are radical partisans of the law of the *survival of the fittest*, not applied to all species but to men and women, to countries and societies of all kinds. What is more Darwinian than the roots of corporations and capitalism?

For the suspiciously celebrated professor of Harvard, Samuel Huntington, “imperialism is the logic and necessary consequence of universalism.” For us humanists, no: imperialism is just the arrogance of one region that imposes itself by force on the rest, it is the annihilation of that universality, it is the imposition of uniformity in the name of universality.

*Humanist universality* is something else: it is the progressive maturation of a consciousness of liberation from physical, moral and intellectual slavery, of both the oppressed and the oppressor in the final instant. And there can be no full consciousness if it is not global: one region is not liberated by oppressing the others, woman is not liberated by oppressing man, and so on. With a certain lucidity but without moral reaction, Huntington himself reminds us: "The West did not conquer the world through the superiority of its ideas, values or religion, but through its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners tend to forget this fact, non-Westerners never forget it."

Conservative thought also differs from progressive thought because of its conception of history: if for the one history is inevitably degraded (as in the ancient religious conception or in the conception of the five metals of Hesiod) for the other it is a process of advancement or of evolution. If for one we live in the best of all possible worlds, although always threatened by changes, for the other the world is far from being the image of paradise and justice, for which reason individual happiness is not possible in the midst of others' pain.

For progressive humanism there are no healthy individuals in a sick society, just as there is no healthy society that includes sick individuals. A healthy man is not possible with a grave problem of the liver or in the heart, just like a healthy heart is not possible in a depressed or schizophrenic man. Although a rich man is defined by his difference from the poor, nobody is truly rich when surrounded by poverty.

Humanism, as we conceive of it here, is the integrative evolution of human consciousness that transcends cultural differences. The *clash of civilizations*, the wars stimulated by sectarian, tribal and nationalist interests can only be viewed as the defects of that geo-psychology.



Now, we should recognize that the magnificent paradox of humanism is double: 1) it consisted of a movement that in great measure arose from the Catholic religious orders of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and later discovered a secular dimension of the *human creature*, and in addition 2) was a movement which in principle revalorized the dimension of man as an individual in order to achieve, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the discovery of society in its fullest sense.

I refer, on this point, to the conception of the *individual* as opposed to individuality, to the alienation of man and woman in society. If the mystics of the 14<sup>th</sup> century focused on their self as a form of liberation, the liberation movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although apparently failed, discovered that that attitude of the monastery was not moral from the moment it became selfish: one cannot be fully happy in a world filled with pain. Unless it is the happiness of the indifferent. But it is not due to some type of indifference toward another's pain that morality of any kind is defined in any part of the world. Even monasteries and the most closed communities, traditionally have been given the luxury of separation from the sinful world thanks to subsidies and quotas that originated from the sweat of the brow of sinners. The Amish in the United States, for example, who today use horses so as not to contaminate themselves with the automotive industry, are surrounded by materials that have come to them, in one form or another, through a long mechanical process and often from the exploitation of their fellow man. We ourselves, who are scandalized by the exploitation of children in the textile mills of India or on plantations in Africa and Latin America, consume, in one form or another, those products. Orthopraxy would not eliminate the injustices of the world—according to our humanist vision—but we cannot renounce or distort that conscience in order to wash away our regrets. If we no longer expect that a redemptive revolution will