

# In Praise of the Intermediary

*by Piroska Nagy*

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**"Fixers", or dragomans, are vital intermediaries and interpreters for both journalists and soldiers in hostile terrain, and play a central role in a network of relationships and transfers. In the Middle Ages they embodied the need for otherness, and continue to do so today.**

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Reviewed: [Zrinka Stahuljak, \*Les Fixeurs au Moyen Âge. Histoire et littérature connectées\*, Paris, Seuil, 2021. 280 pp., €20.](#)

Published just as the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was making its subject matter highly topical, this ambitious book explores the links between the Middle Ages and the present day, and between medieval literature and history, through the figure of the 'fixer'—the helper-interpreter who is invaluable to both journalists and troops in hostile terrain, a character who is also well known from medieval accounts of travel in the East.

## From the Middle Ages to the present day

Croatian-born author [Zrinka Stahuljak](#), now a professor of French literature at UCLA, draws on her own personal experience to explore the link between the Middle Ages and today's world. During the war in former Yugoslavia, this young author, who speaks several European languages, herself worked as a fixer, interpreter and intermediary for journalists and Western observers.

In this essay, she examines the definition, the legal conditions and the working conditions of fixers, who play such a vital role in conflicts, in order to shed light on these unseen people considered little more than useful "intermediaries" so insignificant that there is no law to protect them once a conflict is over. She shines a spotlight on fixers, showing that they are particularly vulnerable because their activity – which is not a profession – makes them ambivalent and suspect on all sides.

In the course of her investigation, Stahuljak creates a continual tension between the medieval and contemporary worlds, frequently going back and forth and asking questions that embrace both worlds. Her method is first and foremost one of engaged history, a means of combining historical knowledge with contemporary concepts and questions, interweaving ethical and political discourse with social science analysis and the historical thread that forms the backbone of the book.

Despite its sustained and pedagogical line of argument, this is by no means an academic work by and for medievalists, but an essay with a contemporary scope that draws on the medieval world and its narratives as an anchor point, a terrain, and an example. Historians seeking the rigor and method usually associated with their discipline are likely to be disappointed. Conversely, as an essay that summons the past in order to think and act in the present, Stahuljak's book delivers on its promise: by discussing the function and status of fixers in two worlds brought together by this intriguing figure, it captures the persistent ambivalence towards these vital mediators, and its injustice.

## **Telephone directories, guides and bodyguards**

Although the term *fixeur*, now commonly used in French, was imported in the 1970s from English, the book shows that the activity itself is an ancient one. In medieval French, there were numerous terms to refer to those who practiced it: *drogman*, *dragoman*, *drugeman*, *targuman*, *turceman*, *truchement*, to name just the most frequent forms, whose equivalents are found in other medieval languages and abound in medieval literature, travel accounts and chronicles.

Zrinka Stahuljak discovers them on journeys to the Holy Land and the Orient, working with missionaries, diplomats, explorers and traders. During modern-day conflicts, foreign journalists, troops and diplomats alike rely on these multifunctional

local helpers who, in addition to their work as interpreters, serve as their "eyes and ears", thanks to their knowledge of the terrain. They act as telephone directories, guides and even bodyguards; they check the details of their clients' itineraries, arrange safe accommodation, and make appointments with local authorities and key figures; they provide information and contacts, as well as the food and equipment needed in dangerous situations.

And yet, because of the role they play, they are highly exposed—as demonstrated by the tragic fate, not "reserved" but rather "befallen", of former aid workers and employees of Western governments in Afghanistan, a country once again under Taliban rule from which they have mostly been unable to escape despite numerous promises.

By shifting the focus from the seemingly transparent act of interpreting to the other tasks performed by fixers, the author allows them to be seen as key actors in the mediation and communication required between different cultures, and defines the fixer as a *mechanism* at the heart of a network of relations, *transpositions* and transfers.

At the same time, Stahuljak shows that, although they may be considered a "function" or mere technical relay, a "pure means" that is effaced, invisible and devoid of agency, defined by their absolute loyalty, the fixer is in fact an autonomous organizer and mediator with agency and a fundamental capacity to act: they intervene in conflict situations and make decisions.

## **An ethical approach to fixers**

By bringing fixers out of the shadow cast by this intolerable tension, the book makes a powerful argument, based on the ongoing issue of the undefined status of Afghan aid workers in Western countries: while fixers risk their lives to save hundreds of others, their life of no importance to their employers or clients.

Their subjectivity is forgotten. It will never be of value to their employers, because the fixer is a deeply ambivalent figure, suspected on all sides of being capable of betrayal, according to the old saying "traduttore-tradittore", and because there is no way of repaying the debt to a person who has saved countless lives by risking their own.

Building on this, the author raises unavoidable ethical questions that concern the ethics that can be applied by fixers and towards fixers, while also touching on issues of politics and economics. Set against the background tension between two time periods, the discussion moves forward with conceptual reflections on the question of the gift and the contract that define the fixer's role; on the modern theory of translation, which sidelines the human being and the body of the intermediary to consider it solely in terms of textuality and intertextuality; and on the idea of the actor as a network and as a contingency figure.

The author's approach is underpinned by numerous medieval texts, from twelfth-century novels to Raymond Lulle, Riccoldo de Monte Croce and late crusading treatises. Marco Polo is a major reference in the book: he is held up as an example of the ideal fixer, the cultured Western man who works for himself and masters different languages; as a merchant, he also raises the question of the fixer's relationship with money and its conversion on a voyage.

We encounter intermediaries in love, such as Brangien in *Tristan and Iseult*; missionaries who used guide-fixers; and reflections on their function in various crusading treatises. The author draws on her medievalist background as well as contemporary thought (from Walter Benjamin to Derrida and Bruno Latour) to develop an approach that addresses all the problems associated with the subject, from ethics to economics, and especially that of loyalty: to whom must the fixer be loyal, and what does loyalty mean?

## **An essential figure**

To compensate for the fixer's self-sacrifice, travelers would insist on the need to shower the person with "*mangeries*" (small, daily required gifts) and "*courtoisies*" (sincere, generous, courteous acknowledgements of service), in addition to the fixed wage, without which, in the medieval East, there was a risk of betrayal. Courtesy was understood as "the monetized recognition of the unavowable debt of the link to the intermediary" (p. 129).

The final chapter goes a step further, explaining that fixers were fundamental to conquest and empire-building, for without intermediaries and communication there could be no administration, and therefore no colonization or imperial expansion.

Thus, for the author, the 15th-century Duchy of Burgundy was the fixer-state par excellence, held together by its network of intermediaries and cultural institutions, and its libraries.

While the idea is more easily defended in philosophical terms than in historical ones—equating the state's intermediaries, so indispensable to every conquest and administration, with fixers—this chapter focuses the argument on an immensely important question, present as a thread throughout the book: the current problem of rejecting the intermediary in order to establish oneself as a subject. The author borrows from Alain de Libera Meister Eckhart's idea of radical conversion, which humbly excludes all intermediaries in order to establish a direct link with God (p. 90)—an essential step, in Libera's argument, towards the modern subject, from subjecthood to subjectivity.

In today's horizontalized world, devoid of transcendence, the rejection of mediation easily leads to the rejection of dialogue and otherness: without an intermediary, says Stahuljak, "the only acceptable position is one's own; one is beyond the possibility of communication" (p. 29). This rejection of mediation is accompanied by a conception of time embodied in the cult of immediacy, as deployed in an increasingly divided public space.

Thus, in praising the fixer as an indispensable figure, the author makes a philosophical and political statement about the need for mediation in civil society in order to maintain social harmony (p. 11). It is clear that the author considers herself, as a person and as a medievalist, as an indispensable mediator between Europe and the Americas, France and the Balkans, history and literature, the Middle Ages and the present.

This short, touching and sometimes disconcerting book sometimes proceeds by bravura, weaving together personal threads, historical threads and essential reflections on and in the contemporary world. Asserting more than it proves, as historians' work often does, Zrinka Stahuljak's essay is as much political philosophy as connected history: while not every page is convincing, it is a fascinating and thought-provoking essay, both on the Middle Ages and the contemporary world.

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