To See the World in a Grain of Sand: Reading and Writing Microhistories

MA Option, Summer Term, 2019-20

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Venue: online
How much can we learn about the past through the story of a single person, place, object or event? For example, what can the inquisition of a heretical Italian miller tell us about popular beliefs in the age of Reformation? Since the 1970s, historians have attempted to show that such ‘microhistories’ can in fact reveal much about the grand sweep of history. By narrowing their focus to magnify the small, the particular and the local, these scholars have proven that studies of seemingly inconsequential subjects can have a major impact on our understanding of history.

This module will examine both the microhistories themselves and the extensive scholarship that has been produced explaining, refining, justifying and critiquing this approach. In most weeks, we will examine a particular microhistory. We will read several classics from the genre - including Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms*, Natalie Zemon Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre* and Martin Darnton’s ‘The Great Cat Massacre’ – as well as more recent innovative works of ‘global microhistory’ and ‘object biography’. The primary focus will be on the period c.1500 to c.1800, but there will also be sessions on medieval and modern topics. The module will include at least one session with a scholar discussing their own experience of writing microhistory and a workshop based on a selection of primary sources, where we will discuss how we might write our own. In addition, by the end of the module, you will have explored the sorts of topics, methodologies and primary sources that could serve as a basis for a successful dissertation.

Outline

1. April 29 - Historicising microhistorians: the birth of a genre (Brodie Waddell)
2. May 6 - Inquisitorial histories: the heretical Italian miller (Brodie Waddell)
3. May 13 - Reading an event: the Parisian cat massacre and the Balinese cockfight (Brodie Waddell)
4. May 20 - Private life made public: the peasant, the imposter and their wife (Brodie Waddell)
5. May 27 - Global microhistory: an Ottoman abroad (Filippo de Vivo)
6. June 3 - Object biographies: the social life of things (Kat Hill)
7. June 10 - Medieval microhistory: a dog and its shrine (Brodie Waddell)
8. June 24 - Ethics and emotions in modern microhistory (Julia Laite)
9. June 17 - Modern microhistory: the woman who crossed dark waters (Brodie Waddell)
10. July 1 - Doing microhistory on the fly: a primary source workshop (Brodie Waddell)

*July 3 - Essay plans and preliminary bibliography due
August 24 - Essays due*
Assessment

Essay

This module is assessed through an essay due at 6pm on 24 August 2020. This essay should be 5,000 to 5,500 words long, including footnotes, but excluding bibliography. It should be submitted online via the link on Moodle.

This essay could take a variety of forms. We will discuss this further in class, but here are some possibilities:

- Analysing the development of a particular approach or type of microhistory
- Comparing micro and non-microhistories of a particular topic
- Deeply contextualising and critiquing a specific microhistory or microhistorian
- Writing your own microhistory using primary sources, including a substantial historiographical explanation of your approach

You are welcome to create your own essay title question, but it must be approved by me. I would suggest getting in touch with me at least a couple weeks ahead of the plan/bibliography deadline (July 3rd) to confirm that you are roughly on the right track. I will then formally approve it, or suggest a revised approach, based on your submitted plan/bibliography.

Writing your own microhistory

If you want to write your own microhistory using primary sources, the essay must include substantial discussion engaging with the wider historiography of microhistory. Ask yourself: what sorts of microhistorical methods are you using and why? Is this a conventional microhistory or is an unusual approach? What does your study tell us about microhistory more generally? By ‘substantial’, I mean that this historiographical discussion needs to be more than a couple paragraphs in the essay introduction. I would suggest aiming to focus at least about one third (1500-2000 words) of the total essay on the historiography of microhistory.

The second issue to remember if planning to write your own microhistory is the availability of primary sources. Almost all libraries and archives are closed for physical visits and only some have significant material available for online access. Nonetheless, there is still a wealth of online primary sources. The IHR has a long list of both primary and secondary sources: https://www.history.ac.uk/library/collections/online-resources/open-access-resources

You can also access some subscription-only material through the Birkbeck e-library: http://bbk.libguides.com/c.php?g=617005&p=4292466

Writing a historiographical essay

If you would like to write about microhistory, rather than writing your own microhistory, there are many different approaches you can take. As noted above, this could be: analysing the development of a particular approach or type of microhistory; comparing micro and non-microhistories of a
particular topic; deeply contextualising and critiquing a specific microhistory or microhistorian; or something completely different. For this kind of essay, your ‘primary sources’ are the writings of historians themselves. However, you still need to remember that the range of sources available to you for this will be partly limited by the physical closure of libraries, so take full advantage of the online listed noted above and the extra collections of e-books that Birkbeck has access to right now, listed here: http://bbk.libguides.com/c.php?g=617005&p=4292405

I have added some examples of possible essay title questions below. You can use them as they are, or adapt them to suit your own interests, or create your own entirely.

- Why did microhistory become a popular approach to history from the 1980s onwards?
- How much has Carlo Ginzburg’s The Cheese and the Worms influenced English-language historiography?
- How much does Davis’s The Return of Martin Guerre have in common with Ginzburg’s The Cheese and the Worms?
- Why are the authors of microhistories more likely to overtly use their imaginations than the authors of conventional histories?
- How much does a microhistorical approach challenge the global history of [specific topic]? [The topic could be anything with both micro and global histories, e.g. early modern missionaries, eighteenth-century travel, etc.]
- How can microhistory contribute to the history of material culture?
- How much are medieval [or modern] microhistories different from early modern ones?
- Does microhistory raise distinctive ethical issues?

Essay Plan and Preliminary Bibliography

You must submit an essay plan (1 page max) and preliminary bibliography via email (b.waddell@bbk.ac.uk) by 3 July 2020. I will aim to provide feedback on this to you by email within one week.

Mitigating Circumstances

You may submit a claim of ‘mitigating circumstances’ for either the essay or the attendance requirement should your students be unexpectedly disrupted. These claims are assessed by a departmental committee, not by the instructor. There are further details available on the policy and procedure and the form is available online as well: http://www.bbk.ac.uk/student-services/exams.
1. Historicising microhistorians: the birth of a genre (Brodie Waddell)

In our first class, we will spend some time getting to know each other and going through the practicalities how the module will work.

We will also introduce ourselves to the concept of ‘microhistory’ itself. What does it mean? Where did it come from? Why do people write ‘microhistories’?

Key Reading

Further Reading
De Vivo, Filippo. ‘Prospect or Refuge? Microhistory, History on the Large Scale’, Cultural and Social History, 7:3 (2010), pp. 387-397
Ginzburg, Carlo. ‘Clues: Roots of an evidential paradigm’, in his Myths, Emblems, Clues (1990); also in Theory and Society, 7:3 (1979)
Hudson, Pat. ‘Closeness and Distance’, Cultural and Social History, 7:3 (2010), pp. 375-385
Magnússon, Sigurður Gylfi; and István M. Szijártó, What is Microhistory: Theory and Practice (2013)
2. Inquisitorial histories: the heretical Italian miller (Brodie Waddell)

Carlo Ginzburg wrote the most famous self-declared microhistory: *The Cheese and the Worms*. It quickly became a classic and inspired many more histories of this type. Why has it been so successful and influential?

It is based primarily on inquisitorial records, a feature it shares with many later microhistories. Why are inquisitorial records used so often by microhistorians? How does the nature of the source influence the text?

**Key Reading**

**Further Reading: Historical Context**
Black, Christopher F. *The Italian Inquisition* (2009)
Burke, Peter. *Popular culture in early modern Europe* (1978 and later editions)
Degl’Innocenti, Luca, et al. (eds), *Interactions Between Orality and Writing in Early Modern Italian Culture* (2016)
Fragnito, Gigliola. *Church, Censorship and Culture in Early Modern Italy* (2001)
Richardson, Brian. *Printing, Writers and Readers in Renaissance Italy* (1999)

**Further Reading: Historiographical Context**
Magnússon, Sigurður Gylfi; and István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory: Theory and Practice* (2013), ch. 1 (‘Italian Microhistory’).

**Other Examples** (full references on p. 13 below)
Behringer, Shaman
Brown, Immodest Acts
Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou*
Nalle, *Mad for God*
Rublack, *Astronomer*
3. Reading an event: the Parisian cat massacre and the Balinese cockfight (Brodie Waddell)

Historians have always written about events, but Robert Darnton popularised the idea of analysing a historically ‘insignificant’ event in order to understand the wider culture. He particularly drew on the idea of ‘thick description’, borrowed from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

How much can a singular event tell us about society as a whole? How can historians do ‘thick description’ without actually witnessing the event itself?

Key Reading
Darnton, Robert. *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984), ch. 2 (‘Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin’)
Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), ch. 15 (‘Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight’)

Further Reading: Historical Context

Further Reading: Historiographical Context
Magnússon, Sigurður Gylfi; and István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory: Theory and Practice* (2013), ch. 3 (‘Microhistory in a Broader Sense’)

Other Examples
Hindle, ‘Shaming’
Hitchcock, ‘Round-House’
Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival*
Underdown, ‘Shows’
Walter, *Plunders*
4. Private life made public: the peasant, the imposter and their wife (Brodie Waddell)

Natalie Zemon Davis, like Ginzburg, wrote a book which soon became a ‘classic’ microhistory. She too uses sources produced in the course of a sixteenth-century trial, yet she tells a very different sort of story. Davis focuses on the relationships within a single peasant household and its wider networks of neighbours and kin.

What makes The Return so compelling? Can microhistories tell us more about past ‘private’ lives than conventional studies? How much room in scholarly history is there for the ‘perhaps’ and the ‘may-have-beens’ that Davis frequently uses?

Key Reading

Further Reading: Historical Context

Further Reading: Historiographical Context
Lewis, Janet. *The Wife of Martin Guerre* (1941)

Other Examples
Cook and Cook, *Good Faith*
Ozment, *Daughter*
Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna*
5. Global microhistory: an Ottoman abroad (Filippo de Vivo)

**Key Reading**
Trivellato, Francesca. ‘Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?’, *California Italian Studies*, 2:1 (2011) <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>

**Further Reading: Historical Context**

**Further Reading: Historiographical Context**
Berg, Maxine. ‘A Different Point of View’, *Global History and Culture Centre Blog* (2018) <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/ghcc/blog/a_different_point/>

**Other Examples**
Andrade, ‘Farmer’
Chakravarti, ‘Gabriel’
Colley, *Ordeal*
Davis, *Tricksters Travels*
García-Arenal and Wiegers, *Man of Three Worlds*
Hodes, *Wife*
Rothschild, *Empires*
Spence, *Hu*
Subrahmanyam, *Alien*
Travers, ‘Connected’
6. Object biographies: the social life of things (Kat Hill)

Key Reading
... and either ...
... or...

Further Reading: Historical Context for Scheffler

Further Reading: Historiographical Context
Hamling, Tara. ‘Visual and Material Culture’, in Laura Sangha and Jonathan Willis (eds), Understanding Early Modern Primary Sources (2016)
Olson, Roberta J.M.; Patricia L. Reilly and Rupert Shepard (eds), The Biography of the Object in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy (2006)

Other Examples
De Waal, Hare
Handley, ‘Objects’
Milton, Nutmeg
7. Medieval microhistory: a dog and its shrine (Brodie Waddell)

Key Reading

Further Reading: Historical Context
Alexander, Dominic. Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages (2008)
Mesley, Matthew; and Louise E. Wilson (eds) Contextualizing Miracles in the Christian West, 1100-1500: New Historical Approaches (2014)
Salisbury, Joyce E. The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages (1994)
Salter, David. Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature (2001)

Further Reading: Historiographical Context
Biller, Peter. ‘Popular Religion in the Central and Later Middle Ages’ in Michael Bentley (ed.), Companion to Historiography (2006)

Other Examples
Dyer, Merchant
Dutton, ‘Monk
Goodich, ‘Microhistory’
Le Roy Ladurie, Montaillou
Petrosillo, ‘Womb’
Power, ‘Bodo’
West, ‘Visions’
8. Ethics and emotions in modern microhistory (Julia Laite)

Key Reading

Further Reading
Barclay, Katie. ‘Falling in Love with the Dead’, *Rethinking History*, online September 2018, pp. 1-16
Laite, Julia. ‘The Emmet’s Inch: Small History in a Digital Age’, *Journal of Social History* (2019)
9. Modern microhistory: the woman who crossed dark waters (Brodie Waddell)

Key Reading
Bahadur, Gaiutra. Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture (2013)

Further Reading: Historical Context
Behal, Rana; and, Marcel van der Linden (eds), Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in Indian Labour History (2006)
Kumar, Ashutosh. Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920 (2017)

Further Reading: Historiographical Context
Bahadur, Gaiutra. ‘Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture’ <https://cooliewoman.com/> [interviews with Bahadur and other contextual material]
Bahadur, Gaiutra. ‘Conjure Women and Coolie Women’, *Small Axe*, 56 (July 2018)
Renders, Hans; and Binne de Haan (eds), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory and Life Writing* (2014)

Other Examples
Chatterjee, *Impostor*
Earnr-Bryne, ‘Rape’
Hodes, *Wife*
Samuel, *East End*

10. Doing microhistory on the fly: a primary source workshop (Brodie Waddell)

For this class, we will find some potentially rich primary sources and think through how we might use them to write microhistories. We will discuss this further ahead of the session.
Examples of Microhistories

Note that not all of these authors would label their work as ‘microhistories’ and some do not fit easily under this label. But they all include elements that make them useful for thinking about the genre.

Bahadur, Gaiutra. Cooie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture (2013)
Brown, Judith C. Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy (1986)
Colley, Linda. The Ordeal of Elisabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History (2008)
Cook, Alexandra; and Noble David Cook, Good Faith and Truthful Ignorance: A Case of Transatlantic Bigamy (1991)
Darnton, Robert. The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History (1984)
Davis, Natalie Zemon. The Return of Martin Guerre (1983)
De Vivo, Filippo. ‘Prospect or Refuge? Microhistory, History on the Large Scale’, Cultural and Social History, 7:3 (2010), pp. 387-397
De Waal, Edmund. The Hare with Amber Eyes (2010)
Erickson, Amy. ‘Eleanor Mosley and Other Milliners in the City of London Companies, 1700-1750’, History Workshop Journal, 71 (2011)


Hitchcock, Tim. ‘”You bitches ...die and be damned”: Gender, Authority and the Mob in St Martin’s Round-House Disaster of 1742’, Tim Hitchcock and Heather Shore, eds., *The Streets of London: From the Great Fire to the Great Stink* (2003), pp. 69-81


Little, Ann M. *The Many Captivities of Esther Wheelwright* (2016)


Petrosillo, Sara. ‘A Microhistory of the Womb from the N-Town Mary Plays to *Gorboduc*’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 47:1 (2017), pp. 121-146


Historiographical Discussions of Microhistory

Some of the most interesting discussions of the nature and methods of microhistories can be found in microhistories themselves, especially in prefaces and introductions. However, the publications below also address these issues.


Bell, David A. ‘Total History and Microhistory: The French and Italian Paradigms’, in Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (eds), A Companion to Western Historical Thought (2007), pp. 262-276


Brooks, James F.; Christopher R. N. DeCorse, and John Walton (eds), Small Worlds; Method, Meaning, & Narrative in Microhistory (2008)


Egmond, Florike; and Peter Mason, The Mammoth and the Mouse: Microhistory and Morphology (1997)


Geertz, Clifford. ‘Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight’, in ibid., The Interpretation of Cultures (1973)


Hodes, Martha. ‘A Story With an Argument: Writing the Transnational Life of a Sea Captain’s Wife’, in Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, Angela Woollacott (eds), Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700-Present (2010), pp. 15-26
Hudson, Pat. ‘Closeness and Distance’, Cultural and Social History, 7:3 (2010), pp. 375-385
Magnússon, Sigurður Gylfi; and István M. Szijártó, What is Microhistory: Theory and Practice (2013) 
McShane, Angelia; and Garthine Walker (eds), The Extraordinary and the Everyday in Early Modern England (2010) 
Muir, Edward; and Guido Ruggiero (eds.), Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe (1991) 
Renders, Hans; and Binne de Haan (eds), Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory and Life Writing (2014) 