Mastering Historical Research: Birkbeck Approaches

• Recommended reading

1. Historians

What is an historian? How has the role changed, from antiquity to the 21st century? This lecture will explore the different roles which historians have played in society, and the different ways in which ‘history’ has been viewed, as a political and social resource. Through so doing, we will discover the roots of our current practices as academic historians and students of history; and will consider how ‘history’ is now related to the wider public, at the start of the 21st century.

Preparatory reading:


Further reading:

  o Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago, 1983)
  o B. Smalley, *Historians in the Middle Ages* (London, 1974)
  o Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Dehi, 1997)
2. Grand Narratives

The historian A.J.P. Taylor declared that "History is not just a catalogue of events put in the right order like a railway timetable." Or is it? This lecture looks at how historians have constructed frameworks to periodise and make sense of the mass of "petty details". While some have devised broad, all-embracing narratives and explanations of why things happen as and when they do, many more have focused on very particular times and places. What roles have grand narratives played in historians' writings? How have they differed in their portrayals of and explanations of the past? How successful were postmodernists' efforts to replace universal, grand narratives with small, local ones?

- Peter Burke, "History of events and the revival of narrative", in P. Burke (ed.), New Perspectives in Historical Writing (Cambridge UP, 2001)
- Anna Green & Kathleen Troup (eds), The Houses of History: a Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century history and theory (Manchester UP, 1999) – esp. Green & Troup, "Marxist historians" (33-58); Green & Troup, "The question of narrative" (204-213); Hayden White, "The fictions of factual representation" (214-229)


Postmodernism and ‘grand narratives’:

Beyond grand narrative: ‘new’ approaches?


3. Revolutions

How do we understand revolutions? Should we approach the history of revolutions comparatively or as unique events in their national contexts? Is there a valid model of ‘the revolution’ against which we can analyse past upheavals? And how has the idea of the revolution been used through time, how have its meanings changed?

The lecture will show why revolutions matter for historians, not only as key events in the past, but also in terms of periodization, primary sources and historiography.

Preparatory reading:


Further reading:

- ‘AHR Forum: How Revolutionary was the Print Revolution?’, articles by A. Grafton, E. L. Eisenstein, and A. Johns, American Historical Review, 107 (2002), 84-128.
- David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840 (2010).
- Keith Michael Baker, Inventing the French Revolution (1990)
- Jack Gray, Revolutions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to the 1900s (1990).


Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (1979).


### 4. States and Nations

This lecture will consider how historians have thought about the state and the idea of nation. Historians in all historical periods talk of the state and of nations, but what do these terms mean and how have they changed over time? How should historians approach problems such as state formation or the success or failure of states? How useful is a comparative analysis of states or of their particular fiscal, military or administrative organisation? And how do different states relate to social groups or even the individual? Should every nation be entitled to a state? Why has the model of the nation state proved so attractive and yet so destructive?

**Preparatory reading:**


**Further reading:**

- David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France. Inventing nationalism, 1680-1800* (2001)
5. Scale

Historians have looked at the past using widely different scales. Some have adopted an eagle-eyed view to capture the whole wide terrain, others a fly-on-the-wall sense of intimacy. What implication does scale have for what historians see and how they understand the past? In this lecture we will zoom in and zoom out, following historians' fascination with everyday life and history from below and then scaling back up to global levels. Microhistorians were particularly interested in capturing the life of ordinary people and followed anthropologists. In recent years, some scholars have argued that we should give equal recognition to the role of ordinary things in the past. This raises tricky questions about the agency of things, but following 'things' also gives us an opportunity to move between scales, from the local to the global.

Key reading:
Further reading:


6. Categories

This lecture will examine some of the categories historians have used, implicitly or explicitly, to represent past societies: class, race and ethnicity, gender. How have these categories influenced and shaped their understanding of the past? What challenges have they encountered? What are the strengths and limitations of their approaches? What lasting effects has the use of these categories had on the study of history?

Preparatory reading:
7. Empires

It has often been said that the history of the world is largely the history of empires. But what are empires? What unites such disparate entities as the Roman Empire, the British Empire and the American Empire that we
allegedly live under today? Can one have empires without colonization? What do historians mean when they talk of “informal empires” or “economic empires”? Is empire-building a purely Western tendency – or has it been common to all peoples at all ages? Why do empires have such a negative reputation and do they deserve it? This lecture will address these general questions through focused examinations of particular episodes and themes from diverse imperial contexts.

Preparatory reading:


Further reading:

- Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: Migration, Development and the Birth of Europe* (Macmillan, 2009)
- Denis Judd, *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present* (HarperCollins, 1996)
8. Migration and Encounters

Has human migration been the main engine of “civilization” and globalization? What is a Diaspora? How do you account for the vast increase in the scale of human migration since the 19th century? What use is the concept to historians? What happens when people move and come into contact with other kinds of people? How are cultural encounters modulated by differentials of power? How do dominant groups use knowledge to keep their domination intact? Are “multiculturalism,” “cosmopolitanism” or “globalism” any more than aspirations?

Preparatory reading:


Further reading:

- Michael Adas, Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance (1989)
- Sunil Amrith, “Tamil Diasporas Across the Bay of Bengal,” American Historical Review, 114, no 3 (June 2009): 547-72
- Kumkum Chatterjee and Clement Hawes (eds), Europe Observed: Multiple Gazes in Early Modern Encounters (2008)
- Robin Cohen, Global Diasporas: An Introduction, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2008)
- Bernard Cohn, Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India (Columbia University Press, 1996)
- Michael Curtis, Orientalism and Islam: Thinkers on Muslim Government in the Middle East and India (Cambridge University Press, 2009)
- Stephane Dufoix, Diasporas (University of California Press, 2007)
9. Readers and Audiences

All historians have to give some thought to the readers and audiences they are writing for. This lecture will explore the development of a number of different audiences for books on history. What do we know about past readerships of historical works, and how did they differ from today's? How can we explain the spread of popular history, a genre of historiography often defined in opposition to so-called "dry-biscuit" academic history? How should we judge the rise of popular history? Do professional standards of academic historians have to be sacrificed in popular or public history? What roles can and should history play outside the academy?

Preparatory reading:


Further reading:

- ‘AHR Forum: How Revolutionary was the Print Revolution?’, articles by A. Grafton, E. L. Eisenstein, and A. Johns, American Historical Review, 107 (2002), 84-128.
- David Cannadine (ed.), History and the Media (2007)
10. Archives and Sources

We know the past only through the marks which it has left behind. But how those marks survive and can now be accessed is not a straightforward process. In this lecture we will think about the difference between ‘secondary’ and ‘primary’ sources, the problems and potentials of ‘eyewitness’ statements, and the processes by which the sources of history are preserved. Some parts of history – kings, governments, the church – furnish us with abundant and obvious primary sources; whereas other areas – women, daily life, political dissent – may require us to think harder about we can gain access to these past voices.

Preparatory reading:

- Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: a critical reader in twentieth-century history and theory* (Manchester, 1999), Chapter 1: "The Empiricists"

Further reading:

- Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, eds, *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London, 2009)
11. Writing history – how to do it

Historians rarely talk about their working methods or the process of writing. This lecture does. How do historians do what they do? How do we relate our specific research to broader questions? How do we join the conversation? How do we (attempt to) make our version of the past plausible for others? By addressing such questions, this session aims to contribute to students’ active reflection about the writing of essays and the dissertation. What is crucial for any piece of historical work, whether written for a degree or for publication, is that it mediates between the chosen specific example and broader questions, between primary and secondary contexts.

Preparatory reading:


Further reading:

- G. Dening, Beach Crossings: Voyages across Times, Cultures and Self (2004), pp. 258-68.