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

MA Option in Summer 2017. Convened by Dr Brodie Waddell, with guest sessions led by Prof. Filippo de Vivo, Dr Matthew Champion, Dr Kat Hill and Dr Julia Laite

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 Davies’ *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.

SYLLABUS:

1. Historicising microhistorians: the birth of a genre
2. Inquisitorial histories: the heretical Italian miller
3. Reading an event: the Parisian cat massacre and the Balinese cockfight
4. Private life made public: the peasant, the imposter and their wife
5. Global microhistory: an Ottoman abroad
6. Medieval microhistory: a dog and its shrine
7. Object biographies: the social life of things
8. From family history to modern microhistory
9. Ethics and emotions in modern microhistory
10. Doing microhistory on the fly: a primary source workshop
INDICATIVE READING LIST:


Robert Darnton, *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')


