School of History

Taster Day Programme 2019
Tuesday 25 June 2019

A1 – Exploring London Before and After the Great Fire – Dr Matthew Walker

In this seminar, students will be invited to compare and contrast a series of images of, and other sources relating to, the City of London before and after the Great Fire. We will do this in order to establish whether the rebuilding of the City after the Fire really did fundamentally change London, as some of the key figures involved in the process hoped that it would. Along the way, we'll look at the architecture of the city before and after the event, and think about questions relating the healthiness of the city, the importance of religion and commerce in London in the period, and the degree to which the legacy of the Great Fire might still be visible in London today. Students will be introduced to a wide range of interesting early modern sources, including printed maps and panoramas, architectural drawings, and diaries and other accounts of everyday life in the seventeenth-century city.

A4 – Advertising the American Dream: 1921-1954 – Dr Jo Cohen

How do you sell the American Dream when no-one is buying? For advertisers and big businessmen, the Wall Street Crash did not just mean hard times; the Depression forced them to defend their very purpose in American society. Distrusted and disliked, admen and businessmen struggled to win back their prestige and power. Their strategy? Rebranding the American Way of Life. Looking at a variety of American advertising, in print and on film this seminar asks: what can we learn from these unique sources about how Americans were sold on the American dream.

A5 - Collaboration and Resistance in Occupied France – Professor Julian Jackson

Between 1940 and 1944 France was occupied by the Nazi Germany. The French people were confronted by moral choices as to how to respond to the occupiers. These choices are often described as ‘collaboration’ or ‘resistance’. But in fact there were many other possibilities in-between. This seminar explores the concepts of ‘resistance and collaboration, and the motivations for the actions of the French in this dramatic period.

A6 - Rhodes Must Fall? Should Statues of Figures Associated with European Empires be Removed from Public Spaces? – Dr Reuben Loffman

In 2015, students in the University of Cape Town demanded that Cecil Rhodes’ statue should be removed from the main square of their campus. Since then, this movement has gone global, with protests appearing from Oxford to that of Harvard. Outside of the university context, commentators have cited Nelson’s column in London as one of the statues to potentially be removed given the admiral’s opposition to abolitionism. In this seminar, we will discuss the historical context of Rhodes and Empire in general together with the demands being made to remove their statues. We will ask what should happen to statues of figures associated not just with the British but also with other European Empires and if the Rhodes Must Fall campaign is correct to argue that they should be removed from public spaces.

A7- SimCities: Introducing the History of Knowledge – Dr Andrew Mendelsohn

How do we know things about the world? Do our ways of knowing inevitably make up people and places? This taster seminar uses the local historical example of East London to introduce you to
these general questions and to the richly varied and controversial history of answers to them. We focus on a crucial moment in the history of how societies have come to study themselves. This was the rise of inquiry into urban life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Cities like London and Chicago were laboratories for this. Never before or since have techniques of ‘fiction’ and ‘fact’, of ‘news’ and ‘science’, of insight and stereotype been so creatively interwoven. Novelists and reformers became social investigators; journalists created methods and standards of academic research. How and with what consequences for us today?

**A8 – Fake News in Medieval England – Professor Miri Rubin**

One of the most toxic and enduring myths about Jews first appears in medieval Norwich. It was the accusation that every year one Jewish community must find and kill a Christian boy. The creator of this tale around 1150 was a monk of Norwich cathedral, a new arrival in the city, and his name was Thomas of Monmouth. He claimed to have based his tale on local rumours about the death of a boy called William some years earlier. Thomas treated the death as a ‘cold case’ and became the zealous investigator, seeking witnesses and clues. He wrote a long (48,000 words) Latin work which summarises his version of events, and vindicates his claims. He had two aims: to see the Jews of Norwich punished, and to develop a cult in memory of the boy as a Christian martyr in the cathedral. In the first aim he failed, in the second he had a modest success.

In our seminar we shall read in English translation a few pages of Thomas’s work. This will situate us in twelfth century Norwich, and introduce you to the figures, places and ideas which animated the city. You will find that some of our discussion resonates with contemporary concern about the resurgence of antisemitism and the rise in hate speech and action in the public domain. All this will demonstrate what we believe at QMUL: that learning about an unfamiliar past is not only worthwhile and interesting, but that it also equips us to understand our present clearly and in an informed manner. I look forward to meeting you!
Wednesday 26 June 2019

B1 - Outsiders in the Middle Ages – Dr Peter Denley

The medieval Christian west abounded in prejudices, proscriptions, violence and atrocities against those who did not ‘fit the mould’. Lepers, Jews, Muslims, criminals, heretics, witches, prostitutes, homosexuals, foreigners – the list seems endless, the treatment relentless. But is this a fair picture of the middle ages? This seminar will look at documents from the period to try to explore the mental picture that conventional society developed about its outsiders, understand the underlying causes of intolerance, identify the institutional, psychological and popular mechanisms of persecution, and reflect on the difficulties of disentangling myths from realities.

To prepare for this seminar, participants are asked to study at least two documents from a study pack that is provided. We will look at each in turn and then address some broader issues:

1. What do we mean by ‘outsiders’ in the middle ages?
2. Was medieval Christendom ‘a persecuting society’?
3. Who defines outsidership? The authorities? Popular prejudice? What is the connection between the two?

B4 - The Swinging Sixties and British Cinema – Dr Mark Glancy

By many accounts the 1960s were British cinema’s most adventurous and dynamic decade. The British Board of Film Censors loosened its grip at last, and a young generation of filmmakers were heralded for bringing working class heroes and a new sexual frankness to the screen. The films of the 1960s thus appear to offer evidence that the decade’s reputation for rebellion and liberation is well deserved. But to what extent can the films of the 1960s serve as barometers of changing social attitudes? How new were the ‘new wave’ films? And who was swinging in London? This session investigates the realities and the myths of the 1960s in relation to some of the decade’s most memorable films, including Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1960), The Pleasure Girls (1966) and Alfie (1966).

B5 - History and the Contemporary Crisis of Mental Health- Dr Rhodri Hayward

This seminar is designed to allow students to think through the relationship between the claimed crisis in contemporary mental health and recent changes in society. Participants will discuss the potential impact of social, cultural, economic and technological developments upon the individual psyche and assess the extent to which psychiatric issues can be read as historical problems.

B6 – What is race? – Dr Leslie James

‘Race’ is a common identifier that is seemingly everywhere yet rarely spoken about directly. In the UK when we fill in surveys and censuses, we fill in ‘ethnicity’ that often lists skin colour, but also countries, regions of the world, etc. What is race? How is it different from ethnicity? Or nation?
Most importantly, what is its history? When did it emerge? In this session we will debate definitions of race and how it emerged in history.

**B7 - Gloriana: The Cult of Queen Elizabeth I – Dr Charmian Mansell**

She was called The Virgin Queen, Gloriana, Good Queen Bess. During her reign between 1558 and 1603, known as ‘the golden age’, Queen Elizabeth I carefully crafted a propaganda image of herself. It embodied ideals of purity, chastity and of English power which endure today in the popular imagination.

But like most images, those of Elizabeth as a goddess and mother of her nation disguised a complex reality. By studying the portraiture that Elizabeth commissioned of herself, this seminar will explore the images that Elizabeth created. We will consider them in relation to the challenges she faced as a female monarch in a man’s world and the difficulties of ruling England in a period of significant religious, social and cultural upheaval.

**B8 – Medieval Stuff – Dr Eyal Poleg**

In recent years historians have begun paying more and more attention to medieval objects. While traditionally we have used written accounts to look at the Middle Ages, nowadays we begin to look at buildings, jewellery, foodstuff or cloths as way of learning about life in the Middle Ages. This investigation has the potential to transform the way we think of the Middle Ages. It also requires the combined skills of historians, archaeologists, scientists and museum curators. In today session we will look at key objects to unearth the potential, and difficulties, in exploring the history of medieval stuff.

**B9 - Dog fights: The controversy over animal experimentation in the 20th century United States – Dr Ed Ramsden**

With the rapid growth of science and medicine in the 20th century, the use of animals in laboratories and teaching hospitals increased. In response, there emerged an influential movement to restrict the use of animals in experiments. The so-called anti-vivisection movement built a very persuasive strategy upon the recognition of the animal, and the dog in particular, as an emotional and feeling organism closely connected to the human, precisely those elements that made them so useful to experimenters. In this seminar we will look at the strategies and propaganda campaigns of both scientists and their critics in the United States by focusing on the fight over the use of stray dogs for medical research.

**B10 - Women in medieval Islam: representations and realities – Dr Yossef Rapoport**

This class will offer an introduction to the history of women in medieval Islamic societies (600 – 1500 AD), their experiences and representations in literature. Specifically, we will ask how did medieval Muslims and European Christians understand the differences between their aspects of women’s lives in Europe and the Middle East, in terms of women’s access to property and marital rights, as well as veiling.
Thursday 27 June 2019

C1 – The European ‘Witch Craze’, 1500-1700 – Dr Linda Briggs

Fear of witchcraft was once widespread and acute. People across the social spectrum genuinely believed that witches cast evil spells to harm communities and crops, and that they had to protect themselves at all costs. These anxieties sparked witch hunts that left no corner of Europe untouched, and claimed 50,000 lives in public executions.

The ‘Witch Craze’ continues to capture the public imagination in books, television and film, but it is a topic mired in misconceptions. This seminar will investigate two key questions: who were the accused, and how were witch trials conducted? We will examine a case study of a trial and primary sources that depict witches to reach a conclusion about who were the victims.

C2 - Women in late medieval England: Dispelling Preconceptions – Professor Virginia Davis

Medieval women were constrained by the expectations of contemporary society which drew on biblical traditions stressing the subservience of women and stressed that as young women they were subject to the control of their fathers and, once married, they became subject to the control of their husbands. Contemporary handbooks of behaviour stressed the need for women to be submissive and obedient and stressed that their correct place in society was located within the domestic sphere.

This restricted engagement with wider society prescribed by men, and male churchmen in particular, was certainly the experience of some medieval women but it was not the experience of all. This seminar will use short extracts from medieval texts and a range of medieval illustrations to explore this issue. We will look at women who defied their families to choose their own marriage partners, women who directed personally the defence of their homes against armed intruders, women who were active in business and commerce and women who ran their extensive family estates while their husbands were away campaigning on the military campaigns of the hundred years’ war.

The expectation that women be submissive ignores the wide range of female experiences in late medieval England and the opportunities which many seized to exercise their own agency and make choices which would influence the direction of their lives.

C3 - Slums, health and the Victorian City – Dr Stef Eastoe

Nineteenth century London suffered from a number of disease outbreaks, not least the terrifying cholera that had led to the premature deaths of thousands of Londoners. Many blamed the poor, who were living in horrid, cramped, and unsanitary conditions. Newspapers were filled with stories of families living three, four or five to a single room, water, slime, and dirt lining their walls, with piles of rotting animal and vegetable matter festering in the dark, dank and narrow streets.

These images and descriptions of Victorian slums are familiar to us, but what was life like for those who called these areas home? In this seminar, using an array of primary sources including photographs, maps and contemporary medical inspectorate reports, we will attempt to answer this question, and consider the broader experience of health, disease, and illness in the nineteenth century city.


C4 - Fascism: a Totalitarian experiment? - Dr Maurizio Isabella

Some historians have argued that the Fascist regime represented a totalitarian experiment, one in which the Fascist Party wished to establish monopolist control over all the forms of political power and over society as a whole. The seminar will seek to assess the extent to which this definition is accurate, and explore the interrelated questions of whether opposition and independent sources of political existed under Mussolini, and whether the aspiration of controlling society and destroying pluralism was ever achieved.

C5 – Causes of the French Revolution - Professor Colin Jones

The outbreak of Revolution in France in 1789 was completely unanticipated. How then did it come to pass? In this seminar we will examine the multiple causes of the outbreak of revolution in 1789 - social, economic, political and financial. How much was the outbreak due to underlying long-term factors and how much due to personal mismanagement by the king and his ministers? If they had behaved differently, could they have prevented revolution breaking out at all? And then again we will also consider what was novel and innovative about the idea of revolution itself that had made it so difficult to predict?

C6 – Pirate History - Dr Simon Layton

Pirates have apparently stalked the seas from time immemorial, bearing witness to the rise and fall of the world’s greatest states and empires. Their mythical presence at the margins of civilisation has enthralled, repulsed, and entertained us for generations. But why do they endure in our collective memories, and how did pirates—and the concept of piracy—impact upon history? This talk will briefly survey piracy’s origins and development in world history, from the Classical Mediterranean to the fabled Caribbean ‘Golden Age’ in the early eighteenth century. It will introduce key texts of piratical folklore, from lurid contemporary accounts to swashbuckling cinema, while seeking to place the pirate within British narratives of its own identity as an ‘island nation’. Finally, it asks what the study of piracy as a historical category can offer a discipline hitherto obsessed with the power of states and would-be pirate-hunters.

C7 - Was the American Civil War a failure of democracy? – Dr Daniel Peart

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln famously declared that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Three years later, the United States, a nation divided by slavery, would disintegrate into civil war. This seminar examines the political causes of the American Civil War, and explores whether the conflict was produced by the United States' democratic system. Together we will look at a selection of primary sources, which will be provided for you, and consider whether the nature of American democracy made a peaceful solution to the problem of slavery more or less likely.

C10 – What is ‘History of Political Thought’? – Professor Georgios Varouxakis

Major themes that will be covered include:

- What is the history of political thought? What does it do and how does it differ from other sub-disciplines of history?

- What are the different ways and methodologies through which the history of political thought can be pursued?
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• What would a course in the history of political thought offer you? Besides the information itself, what skills and capabilities will it develop among the students?

• What kind of concepts does the history of political thought focus upon? (justice, sovereignty, power, fairness, liberty, equality, etc.)

CASE STUDY: As an example of how a text in the history of political thought could be studied and what different approaches could be adopted in order to understand it, we will discuss Chapter 1 (‘Introductory’), of John Stuart Mill’s book, On Liberty (1859). John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was a British political thinker, philosopher, economist, M.P. and political activist, who emerged as the most distinguished political philosopher of nineteenth-century Britain and one of the best known political thinkers, philosophers and economic theorists in the modern world. He was a major exponent of the ethical system known as ‘Utilitarianism’, founded by his father’s friend, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). The fundamental premise of Utilitarianism was that human beings are so constituted by nature as always to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. The best philosophical doctrine, political system and legal arrangements were those whose consequences result in as much of what people wished to have (pleasure) and as little as possible of what people wished to avoid (pain). According to Bentham, ‘It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong.’ However, Mill defined ‘happiness’ differently from Bentham, as we will see in the seminar.

C11 – Afterlifes of Empire – Dr Kim Wagner

In this seminar, we will explore the contested legacies of Empire in modern Britain, and the history, objects, issues and debates that inform public history. The seminar focuses specifically on museum collecting- and exhibition-practices, and the calls for repatriation of artefacts and reparation for historical ‘wrongdoings’.

C12 – Discovering First World War London – Dr Dan Todman

In this seminar we'll use primary documents to find out about some of those Londoners who served (or escaped military service) in First World War London. It will interest anyone interested in the history of war, modern British social history, family history, and the history of London.

C13 – An Introduction to the History of Political Thought: The Communist Manifesto – Dr Jessica Patterson

“A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism”.


So, goes the first line the Communist Manifesto, as composed by Marx and Engels. But what does it mean and why was it written? This is the question we will explore in this seminar. On the one hand it was a theoretical analysis of the role of class conflict in history. On the other hand, as the title suggests, it was also a political manifesto. We will explore both sides by discussing some of its most striking passages and core ideas. We will also think about its context and ask what it was about the mid-nineteenth century that made The Communist Manifesto such a powerful and compelling text.