

Master Narratives in People's History

Scope

What do we mean by “**people's history**”? Is it simply a history *about* the people – and if so, who exactly counts as “the people”, and what aspects of their lives are worth telling? Is it a history *for* the people – that is, one *intended for* a broad public, or perhaps one *serving the interests of* the many rather than the few? Might it be a history *from* the people's *perspective*? Or even a history *made by* the people themselves?

This course examines some of the **diverse cultural and intellectual forms** (texts, plays, exhibitions, iconography, film) through which people's history has been articulated in 19th- and 20th-century Britain. We will explore how these forms engage with and reshape various **master narratives** – “recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals, that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life” (Abbott, 2008) – within their historical context. We will address not only the ambiguities and challenges involved in constructing people's history, but also its emotional, imaginative and intellectual power.

Purpose

- To practice and develop the five **Cambridge English C1 Advanced skills** (listening, reading, speaking, interacting, writing).
- To explore the **different faces of “the people”** within cultural and intellectual production, and examine how these relate to different conceptions of the **role of the intellectual**.
- To reflect on the role of **master narratives** in culture and knowledge – and question the (supposed) decline of such narratives in postmodern times.
- To develop **close reading and critical thinking skills** across a wide range of media and genres.

Format

This course follows a **flipped classroom model**. You will engage with most of the course materials autonomously before each session, through a combination of reading, listening and writing tasks (approximately 2 to 2.5 hours per week). Each class session (30 to 60 minutes) will then be devoted to collective discussion and/or collaborative writing activity.

Pre-requisites

- An interest in the interplay between the **background narratives** operating within a given cultural context, and the **diverse ways the past is represented and interpreted**.
- A **commitment to completing the preliminary work** and a **willingness to engage in class discussions**.

Assessment

- 50% continuous assessment (attendance, oral and written contributions throughout the course).
- 50% final exam.

Provisional outline

1. Lost rights and the Norman Yoke
2. The Whig narrative
3. Recovering the Anglo-Saxons
4. The quiet struggle of the plebs
5. A working-class history?
6. “The world we have lost”
7. A Communist People?
8. Rescuing “the poor stockinger”
9. The people talking and writing history
10. Towards an intersectional, reflexive people's history?
11. The postmodern death (or rebirth?) of master narratives