



## MICROHISTORY

### HISTORY 325W / 425

**Thursdays, 2:00-4:40**

Fall Semester, 2017

Rush Rhees 456

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### COURSE DESCRIPTION

On its most basic level, microhistory is the study of the everyday experiences of individual, ordinary people. In trying to uncover and understand these often forgotten and neglected people and issues, microhistorians have often focused on the bizarre events or random occurrences—a case of imposture, a forbidden love affair, a hanged man who comes back to life—that have made an imprint in the documentary record. They have looked at “little” people and events instead of seemingly more important political events and actors; they have emphasized socially-marginalized groups usually left out of depictions of normative human experience; and they have shown the limits within which individuals have been able to make meaningful choices in their lives. By using individual moments and stories to illuminate larger issues, microhistorians have challenged traditional notions of what matters within history while raising new debates about causality, narrative, and the relationship between micro and macro. In this course, we’ll read several examples of microhistory, as well as critiques of the method and some more general theoretical perspectives, in order to explore some basic questions of historical study... Can we ever truly represent past lives? Where’s the boundary between history and fiction? What’s the relationship between past and present? Can the exceptional reveal the typical? What obligations do we have to the subjects of our histories? Which is more convincing (or truthful): qualitative or quantitative evidence? And then we’ll put the method to the test by composing our own microhistories. Although microhistory was pioneered chiefly by scholars of early modern Europe, our emphasis will be on the method itself and so students will be free to choose their research topics from any time period or region.

By emphasizing in-depth research, close reading of historical sources, and attention to theoretical perspectives, this seminar is intended to engage students in the practice of history at multiple levels. It provides opportunities both for collaborative work and for students to develop substantial research projects.

Our group includes both undergraduate and graduate students. In order to accommodate the different needs and goals of each group, the course plan and expectations will be moderately tailored for each, with an “undergraduate track” and a “graduate track.” In practice, these will not look very different. All students will participate in class meetings in much the same ways, and most of the writing assignments will also be the same. The graduate track acknowledges that doctoral students need to publish in order to be competitive on the academic job market. To that end, graduate students will complete a couple of additional short writing assignments and their research projects will be assessed from the perspective of ultimate publishability. On occasion, graduate students will also participate in extended class meetings that include explicit and practical discussion of publication—topics for which will include selecting appropriate venues, the submission process, dealing with reader reports, etc. All this is meant for current graduate students, but any undergraduate who is seriously considering future graduate study is welcome, indeed encouraged, to participate in the graduate track as well.

There will be a major conference on microhistory taking place on campus this semester in conjunction with this seminar. Titled “The Future(s) of Microhistory,” it will be a close examination of the microhistorical approach at a time when transnational/global and “big data” approaches continue to grow in influence. It will also explore the potential of new perspectives and methodologies for microhistory. **This conference takes place all day on Friday and Saturday, November 17 and 18. While I understand that this may present scheduling difficulties for some of you, I very strongly encourage you to do everything possible to ensure that you can be there.** The list of speakers includes a number of prominent historians; in addition to the opportunity to learn from their presentations, you will have the opportunity to meet them and network as well.

After the conference itself has concluded, I plan to publish a volume of collected essays on the subject. While I can make no guarantees, I hope to be able to offer publication in this volume to one or two of the most impressive papers produced in our course.

## COURSE INFORMATION

Course Website: Please check our course’s Blackboard site regularly as I will post some of the course readings, details about upcoming assignments, and other items of interest.

Communication: Please come speak with me if you have any questions or concerns about the class. I can be more understanding of your needs if you bring them to my attention before they become a serious problem. I am available during regular office hours without an appointment. If you cannot make posted hours, please contact me to schedule a better time. You may also speak to me by e-mail or phone.

Attendance: Attendance at all class meetings is mandatory. As this seminar meets just once a week, any absences will detract from your ability to fully participate in the course. I reserve the right to lower grades for excessive absences or, in extraordinary cases, to withdraw students from the class. If you must miss class for an unavoidable reason, please let me know in advance.

Accommodations: I encourage you to talk with me about any concern or situation that affects your ability to complete your academic work successfully. Students requiring classroom accommodations should contact the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, 1-154 Dewey Hall, 585-275-9049. You can learn more about the accommodation process at: [www.rochester.edu/college/cetl/undergraduate/disability](http://www.rochester.edu/college/cetl/undergraduate/disability).

Academic Honesty: All assignments and activities associated with this course must be performed in accordance with the University of Rochester's Academic Honesty Policy. More information is available at: [www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/](http://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/). This is a collaborative course and you are encouraged to discuss course readings and assignments with your fellow students. However, all written work must be done independently and not in collaboration with another.

Writing Help: We will discuss each writing assignment in detail during class. I am also always willing to talk about writing assignments individually: to help you plan an essay, work through the process, or go over a past paper. I strongly encourage all students to take advantage of this by coming to office hours. Another very useful resource is the U of R Writing and Speaking Center, which is dedicated to helping writers at all skill levels to improve. You can reach them at 273-3577, by stopping by Rush Rhees G-121, or by scheduling an appointment at <http://writing.rochester.edu/help/index.html>.

## READINGS

The course texts (listed below) are available for purchase at the bookstore or online. We will also read various articles and other texts which you'll be able to obtain from blackboard or from online databases (e.g. jstor.org). There will be other readings (some assigned by your peers) that will be announced as the term progresses.

Finally, since all good writing needs an audience (and since, all too often, papers are only read by the professor), we will produce an anthology of the essays composed in this class. This anthology will be the assigned reading for our final meeting of the seminar.

Books:

- Natalie Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*
- Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*
- Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*
- Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*
- Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*
- John Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*
- Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*

## ASSIGNMENTS

The core of the course will be the research project, which should be a work of original scholarship that examines a historical topic through a microhistorical lens. Within those very broad limits, you have complete freedom to choose your topic. In practice, the sources available to you may not permit a "classic" microhistory along the lines of the *Cheese and the Worms* or

*The Return of Martin Guerre*. Yet you should, to the degree possible, incorporate the main features of the microhistorical method and, perhaps more importantly, take a microhistorical point of view.

The typical length for a scholarly article (and, in many cases, an expectation imposed by editors or publishers) is 8,000 words or roughly 30 pages. So that will be our goal. Remember also that this paper must be completed in a semester, just a few short months. You should plan your research project with these limitations in mind, and also remembering that most research papers make a relatively restricted contribution to the field. Think small—this is, after all, the mantra of microhistory—and keep your topic focused.

In order to allow you the most possible time to work on your research, I've kept the readings relatively brief. But there will also be a number of other assignments. Some of these are intended to facilitate our class discussions. Some of them will familiarize your audience (this class) with your materials in a way that should allow us to respond more effectively to your work. All of them should help your research project evolve over the course of the semester.

(please note that I've included all the assignments here. Those students on the “undergraduate track” will be able to skip some of them)

### ***List of assignments:***

- 1) Leading class discussion [in groups, rotating responsibility]
- 2) Report on a critique of microhistory [**Sep7**]
- 3) List of preliminary ideas for topic [**Sept 7**]
- 4) Writer's Portfolio (description of current and future writing projects) [**Sept 14**]
- 5) An exemplar of an article from your field (preferably with microhistory focus) [**Sept 14 – graduate students**]
- 6) Potential target journals for your essay [**Sept 21 – graduate students**]
- 7) Topic proposal & annotated bibliography [**Oct 12**]
- 8) Analysis of primary source and revised topic proposal & bibliography (with preparation of reading assignment for the class) [**Oct 19 or 26**]
- 9) Rough draft, with revised title and abstract [**Nov 21**]
- 10) Anonymous critique of another student’s paper [**Nov 28**]
- 11) Final paper [**Dec 12**]

***Leading Class Discussion:*** We will divide the students into three groups—A, B, and C. Each group is responsible for leading discussion twice during the semester (as marked in the schedule below). When leading, you need to meet with your partners at least a couple of days in advance, develop a list of 5-10 discussion questions, print enough copies of these questions for everyone, and use these and other questions to start and sustain class conversation. You may divide up the various tasks (e.g. if there are multiple readings, individual members of the group might be each “in charge” of one text), but every group member should have a speaking role in the actual class discussion.

**Report on a Critique of Microhistory:** During our first meeting, I'll circulate a list of critiques/overviews of the microhistorical method and philosophy of history and each student will pick one. In week two (and perhaps carrying over to week three, depending on how long it all takes), each student will give a brief (5 minutes) report on their article. Reports should outline the author's perspectives on microhistory and their evidence, and comment briefly on the articles implications for practitioners of microhistory (in other words, think about what's useful/important here for you and for your classmates as you embark upon your own writing of history).

**Writer's Portfolio:** Each person's scholarship has a particular path (this might be chosen or it might be created by default decisions). Create a portfolio of your past, current, and future writing projects. You can divide them by semester and then list future writing projects. List possibilities for each; that is, all possibilities you are currently entertaining. If you were to consciously plan it out, how would you make choices about your writing activities for the rest of the semester, or year? How might they best come together to prepare you for a long term goal, such as a dissertation or future graduate school career? Work out some possible scenarios for yourself, including project you want to tackle for this class. Into which of these two categories would you place it: drawing on "current skills/interests" or things you want to learn?

**Exemplar:** Scan at least the introduction to an academic article that you admire. It can be in any field, although it might be useful if it's connected to microhistory. If it relates to something you are writing about this semester, so much the better. In a few paragraphs, explain to the reader why you think this is a great article. What task did the author set for herself/himself? How was this achieved? Can it serve as a model for the essay you are writing this semester?

**Potential target journals:** Choose three journals that you think might be potential publication sites for your paper. You may rely on your favorites, but do explore at least one with which you are less familiar. Consider a variety of types of journals, including those that focus on graduate student writing.

Summarize the following for each journal:

1. Do you see any recent trends in their area of interest? (And does this fit with what you are planning to do in this course?)
2. What kinds of scholars tend publish in this journal? (Mostly from a single country or more international? Grad students, early career, or established scholars? Historians only, or from a range of disciplines?)
3. What are the journal's guidelines for submission? How might these affect you were you to submit to them? (you may print these from their website and attach it to your paper, if they are too lengthy to summarize).

**Topic proposal & annotated bibliography:** The topic proposal consists of a title for your project, a one-page abstract of your paper, and a bibliography of the list of sources (primary and secondary) you will use for your paper. For the abstract, make sure that your argument, key questions, and main sources are clear while limiting yourself to 250 words. For the bibliography, include basic information about at least 10 sources, letting the reader know what they are and why you are including them in the bibliography. Please identify one or two sources that you think will be "conversants" for your essay.

**Primary source analysis and revised topic proposal & bibliography:** This should be at least five pages long, but you are encouraged to write more. The suggested page lengths below apply to a potential 5-page submission. Simply scale them up if you wish to write twice as much, and try to keep a balance between the individual aspects of the assignment.

- 1) Page one is a revised version of the title and abstract you did for the topic proposal, above.
- 2) Describe how your analysis of the primary source you have chosen will address the following questions: a) How your paper makes a significant departure from the literature; b) Why that departure is important and interesting to the conversation you are joining; c) Address some of the implications of your work (what do we gain by your analysis?). (one to two pages) (Please note that the latter question is often the most difficult assessment to make in writing microhistory – just give a tentative conclusion at this stage of the writing).
- 3) Analyze one of your primary sources (or part of one). Show the reader how it relates to the question you are asking in your paper as stated in your abstract. (one to two pages). If possible, attach a copy of the portion(s) of the source you are addressing.
- 4) The bibliography should contain between 15 and 20 items, which are briefly described as to the contents and use for you. The main conversants for your paper should be identified

**Critique of another student's paper:** Write a short essay (about 2-3 pages) which analyzes another student's paper. Your critique should be graciously written in a spirit of good will and *constructive* criticism. But criticisms and advice for the author are required, so be sure to include your own opinions and suggestions about how this paper could be improved. Your critique will not affect the author's grade, nor will it affect the grade you receive on your own paper. These are two separate assignments. A good critique should address the following concerns:

- 1) Brief summary of the paper's thesis statement and its main points.
- 2) Analysis of the argument: Did the paper have a thesis statement which was clearly articulated? Is the argument logical? Did the author's evidence back up his/her argument? Does the author engage with existing scholarship? What's missing?
- 3) Analysis of organization: Is this a well-organized paper? Do the parts of it fit together in a coherent whole? Does each paragraph express a main idea, substantiated by evidence or examples?
- 4) Style and grammar: Is the essay well written? Did you enjoy reading it? Do problems of spelling, awkwardness, or inappropriate word choice interfere with the author's ambitions? Is the footnoting done correctly?

These are the kinds of issues that are frequently raised in the reports one receives from journals. You may address them in this order, or in any order that makes sense to you. You may also, of course, bring up any other issues that come to your attention.

#### GRADING

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Participation and attendance:   | 20% |
| Preliminary writing assignments | 40% |
| Final paper:                    | 40% |

## RESEARCH AIDS

Identifying a viable topic and finding sources will be two of the central challenges you'll face in this course. Reading widely and with attention to moments that seem discordant, bizarre, or superficially inexplicable should help you identify potential topics. But such topics will only be feasible if you can then find further source material. Although there are a number of finding aids available, the range of interests in our group means that describing them at length here would be difficult. I'm available to help, of course, and you should feel free to stop by my regular office hours or to email me for an appointment if those hours don't fit well with your schedule. There are also various people in Rush Rhees whose assistance and advice may well be invaluable, both in terms of identifying a topic and of locating sources for a topic you've already conceived.

These include:

**Alan Unsworth**, History Librarian  
[aunsworth@library.rochester.edu](mailto:aunsworth@library.rochester.edu)

**Anna Siebach-Larsen**, Director of Robbins Library  
[alarsen@library.rochester.edu](mailto:alarsen@library.rochester.edu)

**Andrea Reithmayr**, Special Collections Librarian  
[areithmayr@library.rochester.edu](mailto:areithmayr@library.rochester.edu)

**Melissa Mead**, University Archivist  
[mmead@library.rochester.edu](mailto:mmead@library.rochester.edu)

Please take advantage of their knowledge and insight! Even if you have a topic figured out and know about some sources, they've a great deal of experience and there's a strong chance that they'll be able to suggest other possible avenues of research.

## SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS AND READINGS

**Thurs Aug 31:** Introductions

**Thurs Sept 7:** Trifles and clues (Discussion leaders: group A)

*Readings:*

- Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero, *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (1991), especially “Introduction: Observing Trifles,” pp. vii-xxvii.
- Giovanni Levi, “On Microhistory,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (1994), ed. Peter Burke, pp. 97-119.
- Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in his *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, 96-125.

Writing for the week, part 1: Report on a critique of microhistory (these may take one or two weeks to present, depending on the number of participants and the time taken for discussion of articles above).

Writing for the week, part 2: Bring a list of at least 3 potential topics for your final essay – write three to five sentences for each. At this point, it would also be wise to start searching for items you might have to borrow on interlibrary loan (or make other arrangements to see).

**Thurs Sept 14:** Heretical Cosmologies (Discussion leaders: group B)

*Readings:*

- Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*
- Ginzburg, “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist,” in his *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 156-164.

Writing for the week, part 1: Writer’s Portfolio

Writing for the week, part 2: Exemplar (grad only)

**Thurs Sept 21:** Microhistory and the bizarre (Discussion leaders: group C)

*Readings:*

- Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description,” and “Deep Play; Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in his *Interpretation of Cultures*.
- Maurizio Bertolotti, “The Ox’s Bones and the Ox’s Hide: A Popular Myth, Part Hagiography and Part Witchcraft,” in Muir and Ruggiero, *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*.
- The Bologna Seminar, “Ritual Pillages: A Preface to Research in Progress,” in Muir and Ruggiero, *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*.
- Robert Darnton, “Pop Foucaultism” *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 9, 1986: 15-16.

Writing for the week: Potential Target Journals for your essay (grad only)

**Thurs Sept 28:** The dangers of interpretation (Discussion leaders: group A):

*Readings:*

- Robert Darnton, “Worker’s Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Severin,” in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), pp. 75-106.
- Roger Chartier, “Text, Symbols, and Frenchness: Historical Uses of Symbolic Anthropology,” in *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 95-111.
- Dominick LaCapra, “Chartier, Darnton, and the Great Symbol Massacre,” *Journal of Modern History* 60 (1988): 95-112.
- Harold Mah, “Suppressing the Text: The Metaphysics of Ethnographic History in Darnton’s Great Cat Massacre,” *History Workshop Journal* 31 (1991): 1-20.

**Thurs Oct 5: Individual meetings, no class**

The goal for this week is for me to meet with you to talk about your project proposal. You should also be using this week to start preparing an analysis of your sources for class presentation.

**Thurs Oct 12: Narrative and speculation (Discussion leaders: group B)***Readings:*

- Natalie Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*
- Robert Finlay, “The Refashioning of Martin Guerre,” *The American Historical Review* Vol. 93, No. 3 (1988): 553-571.
- Natalie Davis, “On the Lame,” *The American Historical Review* Vol. 93, No. 3 (1988): 572-603.
- Hayden White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” *History and Theory* 23 (1984): 1-33.

Writing for the week: Topic proposal**Thurs Oct 19: Identity and “self-fashioning”: implications for microhistory (Discussion leaders: group C):***Readings:*

- Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self Fashioning* (1983), entire recommended but especially introduction (pp. 1-10); chapter 1: “At the Table of the Great: More’s Self-Fashioning and Self-Cancellation,” pp. 11-73; and “Epilogue,” 255-257, along with the relevant notes.
- John Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (2004), entire.

Writing for the week: If you’re scheduled to present an overview of your paper next week, please have ready whatever reading assignment is necessary for the class to prepare for your presentation. It would be helpful if your reading is by one of the “conversants” for your paper, but you may choose anything that will make us better readers of your paper.

**Thurs Oct 19: Presentations in class of revised topic proposal and bibliography.**Writing for the week: Same as above, for those presenting the following week.**Thurs Oct 26: Presentations in class of revised topic proposal and bibliography (conclusion of presentations)****Thurs Nov 2: Individual meetings/work on rough draft, no class****Thurs Nov 9: Rough draft of essays due in class, two copies, with revised abstract and title****Thurs Nov 16: Return of essays with critiques**

**Fri Nov 17 (8:30am-6pm) and Sat Nov 18 (8:30am-5:45pm):** International Symposium, “The Future(s) of Microhistory,” Hawking-Carlson Room, Rush Rhees Library

**Thurs Nov 23: Thanksgiving, no class**

**Thurs Nov 30:** Discussion of the symposium

Writing for the week: Work on essays based on response to rough draft from peer reader and me; schedule individual meeting times if necessary.

**Thurs Dec 7:** Final version of essays due this week.

**Sometime during reading period or final exams week:** Final meeting with discussion of the collected essays in our anthology, and perhaps some festivity as well.