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Article

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Finding the Historical Imagination: Teaching Modern British History in a Social Sciences Context

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In the early days of my PhD, I was talking to a Classics PhD student who, on hearing of my topic, asked me in a concerned tone if I was therefore … a sociologist. I was most definitely enrolled on a History PhD programme—at the Centre for Contemporary British History (CCBH) when it was at the Institute of Historical Research—but my research has always had a very deep relationship with sociology and other social sciences. Indeed, some 5 years after this conversation, I took up a lectureship in social history and social policy in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR) at the University of Kent.

The question of what it means to teach British history outside the context of a history department or programme is really one about what history is … and what it is not. I very much think of history as a discipline, rather than a subject. Ultimately, time and its passing are at the centre of the questions I seek to answer. Broadly speaking, I describe myself professionally as a historian of social policy, with a focus on how people interact with the welfare and criminal justice systems, and how those systems overlap. As much as I am an historian, working on these themes means I must engage with the criminological, sociological, and policy literatures as a matter of course. Though, as an historian in a social sciences school, there are those sometimes-eerie points when I find myself using colleagues' data from earlier in their careers as primary source material or asking them if I could interview them about the work they did. It is, of course, one thing to have your earlier work included in a literature review or used in a secondary data analysis project, it is another to know that your colleague is actively 'turning it into history', whatever that means!

The fact that I teach history in this context is itself the product of a particular moment in British history. Kent is one of three universities involved in the Universities at Medway 'multiversity' campus.[1] This was part of the Thames Gateway regeneration project from the late 1990s and early 2000s, which included initiatives like this to increase the number of people with qualifications at level four and above. The multiversity (not that anyone uses that term these days) was set up in what had been the HMS Pembroke naval school within the Chatham Dockyard complex. The Kent programmes at Medway came from an HE in FE partnership with MidKent College, with staff from the college moving over to

[1] The Universities of Kent, Greenwich, and Canterbury Christchurch all have to collectively work as one university on the site, i.e. we cannot offer the same subjects as each other.

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Kent to run the new degrees, one of which was the BSc in Social Sciences. This used modules from a range of Schools at Kent, including what had been the Economic and Social History Department—those modules, taught by Dr Anne Logan and, later, by me, were then taken over by SSPSSR. A BA in Criminal Justice and Criminology, which I also teach on, was launched in 2006.

Things change. When I first joined in 2006, then as a sessional lecturer, most of the students were mature students from local area who had studied history as part of their Access course. I was teaching history in history departments at the same time at other institutions in and around London, which I enjoyed and valued. In April 2007, I went back to the CCBH for a 12-month ESRC postdoctoral fellowship and immersed myself again in my research mix of history, criminology, and social policy. I applied for posts in history departments, being short-listed for some. In the summer of 2007, a vacancy for a lecturer in social history or social policy or both came up in the team I had worked with at the Medway campus. I applied and was successfully appointed as a lecturer in social history/policy. Having said goodbye to my students at Kent in March that year, I made a surprise return to them in September. Since then, local students continue to form a significant proportion of our cohort, but our intake now comes from much further afield—and are less rooted in the study of history. There are many reasons for this including, of course, major changes in student finance for both full- and part-time study.

What does this mean, then, for me as an historian? Most of the students I teach do not have an A-level in History, or necessarily a GCSE. Indeed, it is not uncommon for History to have been a subject that they actively wanted to escape from in school … I therefore have my work cut out in making history interesting and accessible for them. The first lecture of Understanding Contemporary Britain, a core first year module that looks at British history from 1900 to the present, is framed around the concept of time. I ask them to think about where and how time is explored by other social science disciplines. For example, criminology requires thinking about how and why people ‘do time’; social policy grapples with waiting lists for public services, as well as how the time needed for caring falls unevenly between the genders. We then start thinking about how history allows us to take a longer view of the key issues they examine in their other modules: a criminal justice system that has prison or community services based around some form of ‘doing time’ did not suddenly appear, and neither did the welfare state or gendered inequalities. Some students will really get into the history for its own sake, but the key learning outcome, for me, is that students consider that everything has a history and understand that history is deeply helpful in preparing solutions in the here and now.

I was one of two social historians in SSPSSR until 2020, when Anne retired. However, whilst Anne and I had our identities as historians, we had ample points of connection with our colleagues with both teaching and research. Disciplines like sociology can feel very focused on the present, as researchers seek to understand and theorize new social trends as they emerge. Not all social science research is grounded in the historical context of the research problems, but that curiosity about ‘how has this come about?’ or ‘is this really new?’ is where historians and other social scientists have much in common. At an anecdotal level, people can and do take different disciplinary routes through their studies and then their careers—having a first degree in history is not uncommon for sociologists. On the one hand, I am genuinely unsure where the boundary between historical sociology and social history lies—as far as it matters, it is in the questions we ask of the past, perhaps. On the other, the toolkits of both historians and sociologists have become closer over the years, particularly around understanding how people make meaning in their lives and make sense of the world. Oral history interviewing, including photo and object elicitation, and analysis of text, image, sound and objects are key. In the world in which I work, a much more meaningful distinction is around qualitative or quantitative research, and the fundamental difference in ontology and epistemology that underpins this. Other than the fact that doing

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ethnographic observation is generally out for all but the most contemporary of historians, my methodological toolkit is the same as that of many of my colleagues, if I necessarily need to rely more on the archive.

Training my students in the skills of historical research is not straightforward when most of their modules are in other disciplines. On the other hand, my students are studying closely related disciplines, like sociology, criminology, social policy, law, and psychology. They have a very different methodological training that encompasses a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods. Using Mass-Observation sources with students who are grappling with sampling and surveys, ethnography, and participatory methods can bring out rich conversations not only about the historical themes but also about how research is done and the power relationships within that. Ensuring that students engage fully with the historical dimensions of the sources can be tricky, particularly when the sources seem 'close' to the more contemporary ones they use in other disciplines. Spending time on primary sources and encouraging students to step back and ask critical questions about the who, what, when, how, where, and why that emerge through the sources is key. Where possible, we also literally bring an historical lens to bear on what we are studying in the present: in my optional crime history module, we will take a walk off-campus to where hulks were moored on the River Medway or use old maps to work out where Chatham Prison was on what is now the university campus. The learning goes in both directions, though. Learning about grounded theory through teaching on a methods module was a major 'wow' moment to me, as it helped me to think more critically about how I do research as an historian working in a qualitative framework.

Chronology occupies a different space in this teaching context. Although I am a contemporary historian by training, my teaching will take a longer view. Understanding and then being critical about social structures is the basis of sociology and related disciplines, and our programme learning outcomes reflect that. Therefore, much of the teaching that I do is about exploring key institutions like the welfare state and the criminal justice system over the longue durée. Some of the pivot points that might otherwise apply in historical modules—such as the end of the Second World War—are not helpful here. It is essential to start with the Poor Law or the Bloody Code—with modernity, really—as it is impossible to understand the incremental nature of change within institutions and the law. My students will not be taking modules that cover these, so we must start there. Beyond these foundations, we take deep dives into different themes or issues, and the chronology and the pivot points of change are determined by those. For example, when we look at the history of drugs in Britain, our focus is on what happens from the 1960s with drug consumption and policing. However, a cold open in the lecture with, say, the United Nations Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961 would not work: I need to step back and begin the lecture with the longer context, here, the role of the British Empire, with Lascar sailors in port cities and the Opium Wars. I then zoom back into the specific period we are looking at in the lecture: post-war migration, the counterculture, and developments in policing. Granted, we spend most of the topic focussed on the post-war period, but that touch point to a longer, global history is essential.

We zoom in even further in the seminar, where we will use primary sources or examine debates in closer detail. I use articles from academic history journals, like *TCBH*, for the seminar readings. In addition to allowing us to focus on a particular aspect of the topic, journal articles are a good way for students to engage with the different sources used by historians and how they are used. The three editions of *20th Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change* are essential background reading for my first years, if these are key library stock rather than recommended purchases—this is not an easy ask for students who may only take one module in history. Ultimately, I want my students to go into their future careers being at least curious about why things are the way they are, and to be able to step back and take a critical historical view of the problems they are faced with.

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There are aspects that are frustrating about teaching and researching outside a history department, like staff and student misconceptions about archival research not being 'primary' research or that it is not valid because it does not have a hypothesis to test. What I value deeply is being in an environment where there is a shared focus around particular themes in the human experience, and different approaches to understanding this. However, I will never stop being jealous of those colleagues who get to do ethnographic observations … .

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