

Modern British Studies at Birmingham Working Paper No. 1

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A. Our challenge

Modern British Studies at Birmingham aims to provide new ways of thinking about the transformation of British society, culture, politics and economy from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Challenging what we see as the problematic disciplinary, analytic and theoretical fragmentation of the field, we seek to offer new interpretive frameworks around which to structure further research, shape undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, and encourage new forms of public engagement.

Modern British Studies at Birmingham focuses on ‘cultures of democracy’. By this, we seek to understand the position of the individual in the age of an emerging mass democracy and mass culture. From the early nineteenth century onwards, new political and cultural forms transformed the nature of political and social life. Yet these changes took place in the context of persistent and deep-rooted inequalities of class, gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, age, and religion. Our aim is to understand the diverse and hierarchical patterns of democratic participation in modern Britain. We do not wish to suggest a linear narrative of democratic progress, privilege histories of political engagement or offer an analysis organised around overly reductive binaries of inclusion and exclusion within society, culture, and politics. Instead we foreground the more fluid, contested forms of societal, cultural, political and economic life which shaped, and were shaped by, a new mass democracy and mass culture. Class, race, and gender remain important categories of difference in our analysis, but we emphasise the multiple and historically specific ways in which they intersected, and the multiple sets of values—the sense of being valued—that shaped everyday life in modern Britain. Exploring changing forms of self and subjectivity in the context of an emerging mass democracy and culture, we seek to understand the hierarchies of value that shaped participation in cultures of democracy in modern Britain.

Developing these ideas under the rubric of modern British studies is a deliberate decision. Echoing the transformation of the field in North America, it reflects our understanding of Britain not in isolation nor as an Imperial centre, but as a nodal point in dynamic systems of transnational and global exchange. Rather than isolate established periods and chronologies, it seeks to mark out a field of enquiry that encompasses the period in its totality. In thinking of our work under the rubric ‘studies’ we seek to enable an ongoing intellectual exchange between fields of analysis and disciplines that have too often been treated as discrete.

Our focus on cultures of democracy is an intellectual challenge that we hope will stimulate further academic debate. Our agenda is as much outward facing as it is intellectual, however. Modern British Studies at Birmingham will place this framework at the core of a new MA in Modern British Studies; it will form an organising theme for consolidating and developing our dynamic postgraduate community. Establishing links with community organisations, cultural industries and activists outside the academy, we will also seek to stimulate forms of public engagement and practices that encourage the forms of interaction we see as representative of rich and powerful strands of modern democratic citizenship and culture. The idea of cultures of democracy captures both the subject of our analysis and the forms of

public participation and engagement we hope to mobilise in our efforts to gain knowledge of the past.

B. The context

In seeking to establish new ways of thinking about modern Britain we are acutely aware of the significance of the past in contemporary society and politics. Historical mindedness has been identified as a distinctively modern mode for comprehending and reshaping both subjectivity and citizenship. This was as true of the 1820s (when debates over ancient Greek politics were used to invent modern definitions of ‘democracy’) as it is of today’s ferocious arguments over the meaning and memory of the Great War. In line with understandings of ‘social memory’, this makes the study of the uses of history a field with profound implications for understanding how citizens and policy-makers have narrated themselves, and how the British past continues to contribute to national life. In the light of proposed educational and curriculum reforms history teaching continues to be a matter of political controversy; what has been called the decade of centenaries is bringing historical questions into public life with increased vigour. The traditional narration of a ‘national story’ which has been emphasised in recent discussions about both a new history curriculum and the Great War, makes the need for academic questions and challenges ever more apparent. There is now an appetite for serious debate of the role of history in national life, precisely because these educational crises have impressed the importance of the question on policy-makers and public alike.

As multiple constituencies grapple with the need for national narratives, it becomes more important for us as historians to engage with such projects whenever possible. This task is made more pressing as the popular history of modern Britain is dominated by a growing number of entertaining, evocative, yet often problematic accounts of social, cultural and political change. The high profile interventions of Andrew Marr, Juliet Gardiner, David Kynaston and Dominic Sandbrook and A.N. Wilson are valuable in stimulating public interest in the study of the past, but neglect as much as they include and do little to provide an overarching interpretative framework through which to understand the transformation of modern Britain. Everything we do must take place in a way that encourages constructive interaction between public history and the academy: local history groups and public history organisations are growing in number and support, offering stimulating new visions of the past and its role in public life. Modern British Studies at Birmingham will integrate history within the university with those flourishing historical communities without.

The difficulties of identifying organising narratives for understanding modern Britain are not just a problem for politicians, policy-makers and the public. Indeed, these struggles reflect the state of the academic field. Histories of modern Britain are marked by such a degree of fragmentation that the different sub-disciplines of political, economic, social and cultural history are not sufficiently in conversation with one another. This problem is more acute for the late-twentieth century than any other period. Important works in the new cultural history have broken fresh ground in the sophistication of their theoretical and analytical frameworks, yet the intellectual pay off from such practices is increasingly difficult to identify. Compared with the engaged social history of earlier periods, such work betrays a lack of confidence and struggles to translate specific case studies into broader interpretative frameworks. In showing the links between culture and politics, and focussing on forms of governance, a ‘new political history’ has rejuvenated its field. Yet increasingly the results are highly descriptive, rather

than analytic. Even work drawing on Foucault's ideas of techno-politics and governmentality has often generated accounts of institutions and professions that echo older histories of the state rather than challenging them. Economic history remains relatively vibrant in its own terms, but it is increasingly isolated from broader debates in British studies so that it now rarely contributes to general historical questions. Frequently the history of science and medicine and more mainstream history are institutionally and intellectually separated and dominated by discussions about the sociology of knowledge where key concepts such as agency are found everywhere yet nowhere sufficiently conceptualized. While the recurrent intellectual 'turns' taken in the past decades (imperial, material, spatial) might seem to have revitalised the discipline, they reflect a nagging sense of crisis and a deliberate search for a solution to the perceived problems of history. We might identify the empire and the material in all locations, but if our histories are to be engaged with the present, it is not always so clear why we went looking for them in the first place.

Above all, in the absence of conversations across fields and sub-disciplines, work that is excellent in its own theoretical, methodological, and historiographical terms is often unable to contribute to our understanding of the broader processes that reshaped modern Britain. The publication of Geoff Eley's *A Crooked Line* and William Sewell's *Logics of History* in 2005 suggested that a rapprochement between social and cultural history was tangible and fruitful, and promised empirically grounded and theoretically informed histories that moved on from the divisions of the 1990s. However, how far have we come since these reflections on the state of the discipline? Increasingly it seems this intellectual promise has not been realised. Responses to the 50th anniversary of E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* suggest continuing anxiety about the decline of social history. Those concerned with the loss of history from below as a subject rather than a method of inquiry nonetheless struggle to articulate where we might go in the future.

Historiographical fragmentation marks contemporary scholarship of all periods and geographical locations, but the problem is particularly acute in histories of Britain since the mid-twentieth century. Here older and triumphant narratives of democratisation and welfarism, and more pessimistic studies of economic and Imperial decline, have been displaced, but left little in their wake. The narrow conceptualisation of contemporary history around issues of politics and policy-making, and the development of work on society and culture within adjacent disciplines including sociology, cultural studies and geography has produced a radical divergence between fields and disciplines until relatively recently. Modern and especially contemporary British history lacks both the shared interpretative reference points of other periods and a clear sense of periodisation or synthesis. In the history of twentieth century Britain where are the equivalents of Linda Colley or Catherine Hall's works that offer shared reference points and interpretative frameworks for undergraduates or postgraduates committed to understanding the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? This trajectory further contrasts with works informed by the New Global History or accounts outlining the history of Europe that seek to offer provocative, if not always convincing, interpretative frameworks.

C. Cultures of democracy

Modern British Studies at Birmingham argues that the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the present should be understood through the position of the individual and the changing nature of selfhood, in a period in which Britain became a mass democracy and mass

culture. The transformation of selfhood and subjectivity took shape in the context of three key changes:

- a) The uneven and often hesitant development of new forms of mass democracy, mass culture and mass affluence. Rather than treating mass democracy as a straightforwardly political project, we understand it in its broader social, economic and cultural contexts. Enfranchisement and disenfranchisement extended beyond the ballot boxes, playing out as questions over who could and could not participate in diverse forms of everyday life, and the different and unequal modes and speeds of participation in social, cultural, economic and political life. These created levels of participation between more reductive binaries of inclusion and exclusion that must be examined. Such shifts created new opportunities for living and enabled (and constrained) new interests, social connections and subjectivities.
- b) Globalisation and the transformation of Britain's position in the world. Rather than privileging the idea of Britain as an Imperial metropolis and transnational actor, we treat it as a nodal point in a broader global history. This means recognising the exchange of knowledge, goods and people across national borders, the interchange between the local and the global in a shrinking world, and the complex and fluid structures of global power in which those exchanges took shape. In emphasising this shift we seek to consider both the exceptionalism and commonalities of modern Britain, exploring the national varieties of what Christopher Bayly termed the 'uniformities' of a globalising world.
- c) Shifting patterns of rule. We acknowledge the importance of understanding the extension of governance from the formal institutions of the state to the techniques of control located within the professions. But these changes were not just to do with the evolution of techno-politics in a mass democracy; they were also about shifting forms of self-governance, developments in the organisation of the state, the emergence of new forms of professional expertise and their resonance in the everyday.

'Cultures of democracy' offers a focal point that enables us to understand the convergence of broader processes of social, economic, political and cultural change. It raises pressing questions about patterns of inclusion and exclusion, but also about the complex nature of participation across different forms of everyday social, cultural and political life, elucidating the ways in which individuals could be simultaneously enfranchised and disenfranchised. Thinking about cultures of democracy allows us to move beyond the problematic focus on questions of identity and representation for which the new cultural history has been criticised. Instead of treating selfhood as something that is fixed, rooted in identity, and can unproblematically explain our interactions with the world, it draws attention to the ways in which identity is always in the process of becoming – an 'ever-unfinished conversation' as Stuart Hall puts it – shaped by interactions with social relations, cultural forms, and material constraints on a local, national and global scale. It allows us to understand how representations are rooted in and constitutive of social and economic structures.

The idea of cultures of democracy also allows us to see the importance of the ordinary as a subject of historical analysis. Foregrounding that idea, rather than processes of democratisation and modernisation, Modern British Studies at Birmingham seeks to capture the pluralistic and inchoate messiness of ordinary life and historical change. We do not focus just on those aspects of the everyday that serve our predetermined beliefs about agency and

action. Nor do we seek to examine the ordinary to see the extraordinary; or the banal to see the spectacular. Sometimes we look to the ordinary and the banal to see the ordinary and the banal, and they are no less interesting for that. Indeed, the iterative and the mundane are often more powerful in the formulation and normalizing of identity and ideology as the spectacular or exceptional. As well as tracing the historical formation of British modernities, we recognise the dead ends of historical processes that do not lead to new social formations, political structures or cultural forms as symptomatic of a particular time and place.

The interpretative framework of cultures of democracy can be developed through a close analysis of the changing nature of the public sphere and the shifting hierarchies of value that shaped social, cultural and political participation in modern Britain. We are interested in the changing technologies, discourses and rules associated with the development of the public spheres in an emerging mass democracy and the forms of interaction that took place within these and across them. How were the private realms of personhood and public worlds of politics and social interaction related? Thinking about cultures of democracy opens up new ways of understanding the languages of inclusion and exclusion, how these were negotiated and experienced, and the ways in which the public sphere could change and adapt. Our analysis explores the public spheres within which an emerging mass democracy and culture were negotiated as individuals and groups learned how to navigate its contours and work within (and gradually transform) its rules.

This approach allows us to understand how private and public, personal and political, cultural and social interact with one another. Constantly in the process of becoming, subjectivities are articulated not just as atomised or individual, but in relation to broader patterns of historical change: selfhood is both public and personal, and mass affluence and mass democracy open up new possibilities for seeing and being in the world. Diverse forms of democratic participation are rooted in those everyday rhythms of life that are reshaped by the processes of massification, globalisation and governance outlined above. Rather than focus on the unproblematic category of ‘experience’, this analysis foregrounds how everyday actions bring individuals into conversation with the world around them and create new subjectivities as well as new forms of social action and interaction through work, family, voluntary associations or politics. In so doing we acknowledge the importance of representation, not just as a way of understanding how, who or what is rendered visible (or invisible) but in order to understand how representations of peoples and values are made and what effects these have.

Our interest in the patterns of participation in cultures of democracy is reflected in our attention to historically situated hierarchies of value—the contested ideas of what was valued and valuable that shaped participation in everyday life. Class, gender and race have all proved to be fertile ground for understanding the inflections of power within local, national, international and imperial histories of Britain and the wider world. Nonetheless, by focusing on these analytical categories, whether exclusively or in terms of their complex interplay, there has been an implicit privileging of their role to the detriment of other factors, such as economics or religious values. In contrast, historicising ‘hierarchies of value’ offers ways to incorporate a greater diversity of analytical categories into explorations of selfhood and broader political and social change. Thus, alongside the familiar and important triad of class, race and gender we will also foreground sexuality, age, place, religion, economics, rights and subjectivity while remaining alert to the emergence of new categories and the interactions between these values. By encompassing the full spectrum of individual experiences and the broader material, intellectual and political foundations for forms of inclusion and exclusion

(as well as the interstices between these binaries), we simultaneously seek to explore how individuals have witnessed historical change alongside an understanding of how such experiences have contributed to, and been shaped by, broader patterns and structures of social, political and cultural organisation. Ultimately, exploring hierarchies of value presents opportunities to remain intellectually inclusive, avoid privileging historic and contemporary historiographical concerns and create conversations that cut across regional, temporal and disciplinary boundaries both within and beyond Modern British Studies.

In setting this out we are taking a long period of history – encompassing the majority of two centuries – as a single historical conjuncture. However sophisticated and nuanced our interpretation might be of how this conjuncture came about and what it looks like, and however rich our stories become through treating it as a subject and understanding it in its entirety without imposing any over-determined narrative upon it, it still begs the question as to how change takes place and how we might further sub-divide the period according to a particular chronology. Re-narrativising and drawing up new chronological markers will inevitably go hand in hand in any project of Modern British Studies.

D. British pasts for new times

Modern British Studies at Birmingham seeks to develop new ways of thinking through the British past that are—and always will be—outward looking, inclusive and collaborative. As well as reinvigorating an academic field, we wish to stimulate and draw upon new voices and interpretations and, in so doing, provide fresh opportunities for rethinking modern British history. Our ambitions also reflect our own location within the global city of Birmingham and our interest in the intellectual traditions of the University of Birmingham, both of which provide inspiration for our efforts.

This is how we will meet our objectives:

(i) *Community engagement*: Just as cultures of democracy draws attention to the changing opportunities for individuals to engage with the public world, so we will enable new forms of public engagement and democratic participation through an ongoing programme called Witnessing Britain. Rather than provide another platform for social and political elites, these events will enable conversations about the everyday experiences of social, cultural, political and economic change that have defined modern Britain.

(ii) *Teaching*: The intellectual framework outlined here will provide the focus for our new MA in Modern British Studies and, in particular, our two core courses on Themes in Modern British Studies and Sites and Sources of Modern Britain Studies.

(iii) *Research*: The critical mass of scholars working on Modern Britain at Birmingham will continue to pursue their own interests, but these will be situated in broader conversations and help to inform a shared intellectual project that makes us more than our individual parts. We will encourage and provide sites for research seeking to move beyond the fragmentation of the field whether by academic staff or a postgraduate community.

(iv) *Interdisciplinarity*: Modern British Studies does not pretend to have the status of a disciplinary formation but is intended as a field of enquiry that can enable an ongoing conversation with colleagues working across fields and disciplines.

(iv) *Beyond Birmingham*: We will establish active links with scholars working in modern British studies in other institutions, in particular those associated with comparable centres in north American including Northwestern University; Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey; the University of California, Berkeley; and York University, Toronto. These links will extend to providing opportunities for reciprocal intellectual exchange and visiting fellowships for faculty, postdoctoral researchers and doctoral researchers.

(vi) *Working papers in Modern British Studies*: Rather than formulating a static agenda, we are committed to continual reflection on our intellectual work, pedagogy and public engagement. To sustain this we will publish regular collaborative Working Papers on Modern British Studies that are accessible to anyone interested in the field. This is the first of these papers.