

# *Rethinking Britain in the Nineties: Towards a New Research Agenda*

A Virtual Workshop Series, January – March 2021

Organisers: Dr David Geiringer (QMUL) and Dr Helen McCarthy (Cambridge)

Historians of Britain have only recently started doing serious, empirical work on the period since 1990 and have yet to construct new interpretative frameworks with the power to challenge and complicate settled understandings of the very recent past. Nor have they done more than scratch the surface of the opportunities afforded by working with ‘born digital’ sources (including web archives, email and electronic records) which will dominate the source base as we move beyond the mid-1990s. This workshop series aims to map existing work and stimulate new thinking on a decade which, from the perspective of our present times, looks very unfamiliar indeed. It will draw for inspiration upon the innovative scholarship produced in recent years on the 1970s and 1980s, which has done a great deal to reconfigure existing periodisations and metanarratives and to open up new avenues of research on Britain in the late twentieth century. It will also tackle head on the possibilities and challenges posed by the era of the born-digital record, embracing the so-called ‘digital revolution’ as both a subject of investigation *and* a methodological lens.

The workshop sessions will emphasise **discussion and dialogue**, with short pre-circulated ‘provocations’ kicking off what we hope will be a wide-ranging and inclusive conversation about this emerging field. The panels will cover questions of periodization, narratives and interpretive frameworks, methods and sources, and teaching and pedagogy. Our perspective will be interdisciplinary and comparative, as we draw on expertise from other disciplines and from historiographies beyond Britain.

## **PROGRAMME**

(all timings are GMT)

### **Panel 1: When was the Nineties?**

**Tuesday, 12th January, 3pm - 4.30pm**

Provocation: David Geiringer (QMUL)

*What are the problems of periodization when one studies the 1990s? Should we talk about the ‘long 1990s’ or the ‘short 1990s’? What trends or themes from the 1980s continue to shape the history of the 1990s? Was it the era of ‘neoliberalism’? The era of ‘globalisation’? The era of ‘optimism’? What can we learn from the ways in which historians have dealt with periodization for earlier decades, eg the 1960s, 70s and 80s? Or from historians writing about the 1990s in other nation-states? How was Britain’s 1990s distinct from, say, Germany’s or Russia’s or the United States? Why have historians been comparatively slow to study this*

*decade? What work do periodizations like 'the nineties' do in historical analyses? How have the 1990s been wielded in contemporary culture? What is the significance of the millennium in understandings of the 1990s?*

*Respondents:*

Matthew Hilton (QMUL)

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (UCL)

Lawrence Black (York)

Pat Thane (Birkbeck)

Lucy Delap (Cambridge)

## **Panel 2: Political Narratives**

**Tuesday 19th January, 3pm - 4.30pm**

Provocation: Colm Murphy (QMUL)

*How should we think about the political history of the 1990s? Neoliberalism ascendant or social democracy reborn? The rise of 'open' or 'e-government', the flowering of civil society, or the age of disengagement, apathy and distrust? How should we historicise the legacies of Thatcherism, Majorism, the Rise of New Labour and the 'Third Way' following the passage of time? How might we characterise the politics of the Union in the 1990s? How might the financial crisis, Brexit, the election of Trump and the Covid-19 pandemic alter our framings of politics in the 1990s?*

*Respondents:*

Ben Jackson (Oxford)

Emily Robinson (Sussex)

Tim Bale (QMUL)

Peter Sloman (Cambridge/POLIS)

## **Panel 3: Cultural Narratives**

**Tuesday, 2nd February, 3pm - 4.30pm**

Provocation: Sam Wetherell (York)

*How should we conceptualise social and cultural change in the 1990s? The era of the digital revolution; the end of class; 'liquid modernity' and individualisation; 'post-feminism'; 'third-wave feminism'; multiculturalism ascendant; the rise of the city; the decline of community; a cultural renaissance? What narratives or interpretive frameworks should we engage as historians to make sense of these trends and developments?*

*Respondents:*

Lucy Robinson (Sussex)

Kennetta Perry (DMU)

Jon Lawrence (Exeter)

Alwyn Turner (Chichester)

#### **Panel 4: Global Narratives**

**Tuesday, 16th February, 2-3.30pm** (Please note the earlier start time)

Provocation: Lindsay AQUI (Westminster)

*How should we think about Britain's global engagements in this period, the period of the end of the Cold War, the rise of 'human rights', the problem of 'failed states', the threat of global terrorism, Britain's military interventions under Major and Blair? How helpful are the categories of 'globalisation' and 'international community' or 'post-imperialism' for the historian of the 1990s? Did Britain 'find a role' in the 1990s? If so, did it lie in Europe, across the Atlantic or somewhere else? How did shifting patterns of migration and capital from different parts of the world remake Britain as a 'global' nation (and perhaps London in particular)?*

*Respondents:*

James Ellison (QMUL)

Celia Donert (Cambridge)

Paul Betts (Oxford)

Tehila Sasson (Emory)

Saul Dubow (Cambridge)

#### **Panel 5: Digital Narratives**

**Monday, 1st March, 3-4.30pm**

Provocation: James Baker (Sussex)

*Was the 1990s the decade of the 'digital revolution'? How was the promise of new digital technologies understood at the beginning of the decade, and how did the debate change? What were the hopes, expectations and fears about digital in these years? How did personal computing and mobile telephony change people's day-to-day lives, and which people and where? To what extent did policymakers embrace 'e-democracy' and 'e-government', and what did this mean in practice for electioneering and public service delivery?*

*Respondents:*

John Naughton (Cambridge)

Tom Lean (York)

Jon Agar (UCL)

Jane Winters (School of Advanced Study)

#### **Panel 6: What is the Archive of the 1990s?**

**Monday 15th March, 3-4.30pm**

*Methodological perspectives on researching the 1990s:*

Media sources: Daisy Payling (Essex)

Voluntary Sector Archives: Jennifer Crane (Oxford)  
Oral History and Official Records: Cath Haddon (Institute for Government)  
Archiving the 1990s: Andrew Riley (Churchill Archives Centre)