

Microhistory – Parish History – Local History. Seventh Warwick Symposium on Parish Research

Veranstalter: Warwick Network for Parish Research / Centre for Renaissance Studies, University of Warwick

Datum, Ort: 08.05.2009–09.05.2009, Warwick
Bericht von: Graham Chernoff, University of Edinburgh

This two-day event, consisting of an academic workshop and a public symposium, was organized by the Warwick Network for Parish Research in association with the Centre for Renaissance Studies. The generous support of the Mellon Newberry Project and the Humanities Research Centre allowed the participation of over forty scholars from the U.K., Continental Europe, and North America, and the award of postgraduate bursaries to Graham Chernoff (Edinburgh) and Pavel Kůrka (Prague).

The Friday workshop focused on methodical and conceptual issues in current research. BEAT KÜMIN (Warwick) welcomed participants, arguing that the parish offers a particularly useful unit of microhistorical investigation, since its universality might help to alleviate the problem of representativity. This concern – of analysing only specific histories rather than general themes – was voiced throughout the discussions. Yet any fear that microhistorical tools yield only myopic and parochial (if the pun can be forgiven...) insights was swept away by the engaging and penetrating findings nine historians presented throughout the day.

JOHN CRAIG (Simon Fraser) began with an overview of the changes parish churches experienced during the sixteenth century. His triptych of 'texting, briefs, and thongs' refers to the remnants of these changes: painted sentences on walls, letters authorising charitable collections, and pieces of metal used to mend bell collars. To see the results of such changes, he enlisted the help of William Glibery, a preacher who tended to laugh at his sermons incorporating the baser sort of farmyard examples. This led to a charge from the godly that he used profane words: they labelled him a 'ridiculous preacher'. In this accusation (politici-

sed when Archbishop Whitgift refused to suspend Glibery), the preacher became the perfect example of how sacredness accrued to the verbal in early modern England.

DAVID CRESSY (Ohio State) began with methodical considerations on how histories can be recoverable and connected with larger national narratives. Cressy argued that historians can access the mind and memory of historical actors from almost any entry point to produce microhistory that informs macrohistory. The speaker then described three incidents (involving the vice-chancellor of Cambridge University, two Wiltshire boys, and the parish rector of Noyle) from the 1630s, which without further elaboration would seem to be insignificant, serendipitous, and local. Yet by analysing them and their contexts, he showed how they can inform national ideas of property, relations, and authority. The paper triggered a lively discussion on the roles of historians' judgement and microhistorical theory.

Following some reflections on microhistory in different historiographical traditions, JOHN WALTER (Essex) focused on a mêlée in Colchester in 1642 when a group of 5,000 invaded Sir John Lucas's house. Walter interpreted this action as a seventeenth-century version of local class violence. Looking at the Colchester riot, Walter argued, the historian faces the task of questioning assumptions about the English Revolution and its causes. This 'moment of rapture' showed how the local and the national were not distinct concepts in popular agency at the time. The speaker concluded with an appeal to reintegrate different heuristic categories so future historians can write a broader cultural history that could transcend the boundaries of the parish.

CRAIG HARLINE (Brigham Young) explored the ways historians – intent on making their findings more accessible – could learn from the novel as a form of writing. He argued a novelist can offer precise insights into his characters without the need to rely on documents, while historians find the lack of suitable documentation an insurmountable barrier to painting a similarly differentiated picture. Harline suggested a way to reconcile these desires for insight and solid historical work: he explained how a history might reveal the similarities between the past and the present.

He wished not to paint the past with an anachronistic presentist brush, but to allow history to resonate with personal experience now.

WILLIAM NAPHY (Aberdeen) illustrated the problem of ‘too many records’ with reference to infanticide and sodomy cases in Geneva. Magistrates aimed to recover intimate detail – there were few taboos in sixteenth-century Genevan proceedings. The records thus contain an abundance of information on daily life, but to what extent, Naphy asked, can they be taken further? Do they provide too flimsy a foundation for serious historical enquiry? Despite their volume, infanticide cases refer only once to women’s motives, when a defendant explained: ‘It would have ruined my life’. The incident of a man who approached a woman in church with the pickup line: ‘Shall we share my book?’ suggests men and women were not always separate in church and this young woman, probably a servant, might have been able to read. Anecdotal snippets thus provide the historian with a sense of society and sometimes with much more.

GUIDO RUGGIERO (Miami) outlined guidelines and strategies for microhistory. He argued that though smaller-scale investigations are partial and unable fully to reconstruct, they can reintroduce people as the subjects of history, in contrast to many of the dominant (post-)modern macrohistorical concepts. His strategies for microhistory take this into account. Priestesses in the Italian town of Latiana, for example, were representatives of spirituality for the town at large. When spiritual power appeared to be abused, the townsfolk turned on them. The case served to illustrate how microhistorians must subject an individual or group to exhaustive archival research, preventing interpretations based solely on isolated incidents. Yet, at the same time, the speaker warned of rigid definitions and rules, as guidelines need to remain flexible.

JAMES AMELANG (Madrid) contrasted the parish’s historical significance with its relative neglect in early modern Spanish historiography. Scholars of seventeenth-century Barcelona, for example, rank membership in a guild or neighbourhood much higher than parish affiliation. Parishes were diverse in size, distribution, and coverage. In the North, they were denser than in the South. Despite

their religious and charitable activities, parishes were not institutional recordkeepers as in other countries like England. The parish also played a political role: in the East, vestries appear highly developed, while in the West they overlapped with village councils. In this way political and spiritual commonweal often resided in the same people, if not technically in the same body.

JAMES COLLINS (Georgetown) challenged the Annales notion that early modern France was a stable, sedentary society by surveying evidence of geographical and social mobility. For example, 50 per cent of taxpayers who were resident in one town in 1623 had left somewhere else by 1630. He showed how tax records demonstrate significant changes in literacy and administration. The motives and aims for mobility are obvious too: women moved more often when they became widowed and needed to look for work, while mobile men often headed to places with higher rent, indicating social improvement. Analysing further documentation like crop yields and house censuses can help historians reconstruct networks of power in the economic, social, and political structures of over 30,000 early modern French parishes.

MARTIAL STAUB (Sheffield) used the historiography of discipline as a way to gain new perspectives on the late medieval parish. In line with the work of John Bossy and Eamon Duffy, he emphasized the extent of lay and local initiatives rather than top-down control. Focusing in particular on the applicability of paradigms of modern society (and conceptualizations ranging from Tocqueville and Gramsci to Foucault), he examined notions such as voluntarism nurturing a ‘civil society in miniature’ and contrasted medieval pastorates with modern *gouvernementalité*. With its emphasis on the Scriptures and social control, the Reformation opened a new phase in the history of discipline.

LYNDAL ROPER (Oxford) opened the discussion with a comment on themes and tensions of the day’s papers, highlighting issues such as differences in attitude to theory, the relationship between individual and collective forces, the place of the parish among other reference points, and the conflicting feelings of pleasure (of stories) and guilt (about me-

thodical challenges) among microhistorians.

The Saturday symposium proceeded from methodical reflection to three specific case studies. CLIVE BURGESS (Royal Holloway) used the archives of All Saints', Bristol, to investigate how parishioners contributed to religious life in church and parish. As elsewhere, All Saints' had to jostle for position with friaries, nunneries, hospitals, and almshouses as providers of worship and spiritual fulfilment. Parish provision became increasingly decorous to encourage participation. There is evidence for church expansion, chantry foundations, and a guild presence. All Saints' supported a varied experience of churchgoing; parishioners financed (individually and collectively) two organs, a peal of bells, numerous images, a set of three vestments, and flexible hangings used for changing liturgical purposes. There are also references to the purchase and copying of musical literature. Overall, Burgess argued, parochial infrastructure and activities could be considered as extensive and differentiated as in a late medieval collegiate church. The paper demonstrated the social depth of investment in this urban environment, where spiritual endeavour and sophisticated administration turned the parish into an all-important symbol of cultural, social, and spiritual health.

GRAEME MURDOCK (Dublin) considered a series of events in Choulex, near Geneva, that presents moral discipline as a politically and morally fluid exercise. The area had turned Reformed in 1536 and remained so for several decades after its return under Savoyard rule in 1567. In the Reformed period, dancing, as elsewhere, was banned. In 1591, the local minister, Pierre Petit, led a consistory case about dancing against the leading families of the parish. A raucous party had resulted in many witnesses to dancing covering up for others, though willingly giving names the authorities already knew. Deeper issues involved in this 'scandal' emerge from developments four years later, when Petit came under close scrutiny from the Company of Pastors. The dancing offenders complained that Petit had sought protection from the Savoyard army, suggesting split allegiances confirmed by Petit's 1598 conversion to Catholicism. The paper thus illustrated the con-

tinuing relevance of friendship, neighbourliness, and mutuality in this community. In the end, Murdock argued, consistory discipline could not produce a clean and slick version of Reformed religion: the results were messy and, though they related to Christian morality, indicate more about how people negotiated multiple allegiances in their religious and social lives.

ANGELO TORRE (East Piedmont) focused on the relationship between confraternities and the parish in the Piedmontese town of Chieri during the late sixteenth century. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction was divided, and lay bodies like the parish of St George and the brotherhood of Jesus evolved distinct 'communities of rights' and 'cultures of possession'. Their co-existence also resulted in contests over public space and personal belonging. Because of a dispute over church furnishing, the confraternity moved to another oratory in 1577, presenting brothers with difficulties about the main centre of their religious life. In such situations, the parish emerges as a social organism as well as a geographically defined place or a building. A subsequent legal settlement provided for a confraternity with two focal points, allowing members to stay active in parish life while having a 'niche' of their own. The physical and spiritual boundaries of ecclesiastical bodies were thus constantly renegotiated, if need be with recourse to the law.

GIORGIO CHITTOLINI (Milan) concluded the symposium with a comment and suggestions for general discussion. He problematized the notion of 'the parish', pointing to the wide range of forms, functions, and meanings in different parts of Europe. Yet he also found strong ties between parishioners and pastoral care, preaching, rituals, and administration. Key variables for comparative analysis include size and territorial composition. Elaborating on these issues in a broad geographical and chronological perspective, the discussion identified many challenges, but also emphasized the potential of further investigation.

The 2009 Warwick Parish Research Symposium was a resounding success, demonstrating how historians are actively and convincingly applying microhistorical strategies and guidelines to their work. The parish as a

unit of historical enquiry received thorough cross-examination about whether it is useful and broad enough for European historical research. The parish stood its ground well, though, as twelve historians moved between raw data, narrative, and historiography to inform their analyses of parishes throughout Europe. The parish came out as representative yet unique, local yet national, and, aptly, microhistorical yet macrohistorical.

Conference overview:

John CRAIG (Simon Fraser University), 'Texting, briefs and thongs: the changing history of the early modern English parish'

David CRESSY (Ohio State University), 'To see a world in a grain of sand: Histories and microhistories of early modern England'

John WALTER (University of Essex), 'Putting the politics back in: Writing micro-history the English way'

Craig HARLINE (Brigham Young University), 'Microhistory and the Frustrated Novelist—Reflections'

William NAPHY (University of Aberdeen), 'The Problem of too many Records'

Guido RUGGIERO (University of Miami), 'From the Women Priests of Latisana to Bird Hunting in the Streets of Renaissance Florence: Adventures in Microhistory'

James AMELANG (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), 'Problems with Parishes: A View from Spain'

James COLLINS (Georgetown University), 'Cross pollination: The secret life of parishes'

Martial STAUB (University of Sheffield), 'Reconsidering parish discipline'

Lyndal ROPER (Balliol College, Oxford), 'Comment'

Clive BURGESS (Royal Holloway), 'What did they think they were doing? The parishioners of All Saints', Bristol, in the century before the Reformation'

Graeme MURDOCK (Trinity College, Dublin), 'Rural Reformed religion: Life in a Savoyard parish'

Angelo TORRE (Università del Piemonte Orientale), 'Parish and confraternity in Chieri'

Giorgio CHITTOLINI (Università di Milano), 'Comment'

Tagungsbericht *Microhistory – Parish History – Local History. Seventh Warwick Symposium on Parish Research. 08.05.2009–09.05.2009, Warwick*, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 25.08.2009.