History 97k: What Is Social History?

Spring 2017 – Thursdays 2-5pm

Professor Sidney Chalhoub

For a long time, the writing of history focused mainly on kings, politicians, landlords, slave owners, capitalists –that is, on those with the means to write letters, autobiographies, official documents. In the past decades, historians have increasingly studied the lives of people not apparently entitled to have their histories told: peasants, slaves, women, industrial workers. Social History is the study of the experiences of those who lived most or all of their lives submitted to the power and the oppression of others. What did these people do with what was done to them? What sources are there to investigate this question and how should historians analyze them?

Topics for 2017:

The History of Social History since the 1960s

This unit will explore key concepts in the practice of social historians as they appeared in the classical work of British historian E. P. Thompson in the 1960s and 1970s, such as agency, structure, class and class struggle, and so on. It will seek to interrogate to what extent historical concepts articulated to understand a particular historical process—that is, situated in a given space and time—can be deployed to study other societies and time periods. So, for example, to what extent can concepts such as agency and class, as Thompson conceived of them to understand the formation of the working class during the Industrial Revolution in England, help us to understand the lives of Africans and their descendants in slave societies such as Brazil, Cuba or the US in the nineteenth century?

The Writing of History

As historians we seek guidance and inspiration from great works written by masters of our craft. If E. P. Thompson will help us to get started, the following unit will be devoted to a close reading and discussion of Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*. The book will allow us to discuss the sources and strategies used by Davis to delve into a story pertaining to a peasant community in sixteenth-century France. Furthermore, we will discuss the lively exchange between Natalie Davis and another historian, Robert Finlay, who heavily criticized her book for being allegedly anachronistic in the way it discussed gender relations in France at that time. Are historians able to convey the experience of peoples in the past with any kind of objectivity, or at least with some degree of verisimilitude (that is, with a semblance of truth, of plausibility)? Why does it even matter to ask such a question? The unit will include the screening and discussion of the movie *Martin Guerre*, in which Natalie Davies herself worked as a consultant.

The Historian and the Archives

This unit will explore what historians do when they want to tell the history of multitudes of people who lived under extremely oppressive regimes, such as slavery, for example. We will explore (that is, we will read very slowly) a sample of sources of the type that historians of Brazilian slavery have been using to study diverse aspects of the experience of slaves: How did they constitute families? Which strategies did they use to obtain manumission, if that was possible at all? How did they resist oppression? How did they practice their African religions in the New World? How did they deal with the trauma of being bought and sold—of being in the market, literally? Can historians reconstruct, reimagine, or render credible accounts of what these people went through? Why is it important to do so?