

## “Methodological and theoretical problems in history”

The Norwegian Research School in History (NRSH)

Place: Zoom/Teams

Date: 1-5 March 2021

The course addresses foundational problems related to theory (ideas/principles to explain a practice or account for a situation) and method (planned procedure to pursue knowledge), and highlights the connections between them. PhD dissertations should be “an independent, cohesive scientific work of high academic merit as regards the formulation of research questions, methodology, theoretical and empirical foundation [...]”, according to [the national guidelines for PhD adjudication committees](#). In this course, we combine teacher-led reading seminars on theory, methods and ethics with discussions of student essays that tackle a core theoretical assumption and/or methodological problem in their PhD projects. This way, the course aims to enhance the students’ understanding of how and why historians theorize and to bridge from theory to methods.

### Draft program

The program might be adjusted before and during the course, so please do not book other meetings between 9 and 16 for the duration of the course. It is quite demanding to spend this much time on Zoom, so we encourage everyone to use the breaks to enjoy time off from their screens. Students will participate in 4-5 of the essay modules, and further information on these will be posted in Teams.

	<b>Monday 1th March</b>	<b>Tuesday 2th March</b>	<b>Wednesday 3th March</b>	<b>Thursday 4th March</b>	<b>Friday 5th March</b>
9:00		Morning plenary	Morning plenary	Morning plenary	Morning plenary
9:15-10	Welcome and presentations	Essay seminar	Seminar 3: De-Shamanizing Siberia” Liudmila Nikanorova, UiT	Seminar 5: «Numbers in history. History in Numbers» <a href="#">Camilla Brautaset</a> , UiB	Essay seminar
10:15-11	Seminar 1: «How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Theory» by <a href="#">Toufoul Abou-Hodeib</a> , UiO.	Seminar 2: “200 Years in the Making (ii): Finding One’s Niche and Making the Most of It” Stephan Sander-Faes, UiB	Cont.	Cont.	Seminar 6: “The study of informal relations and networks, and how this may help in integrating micro- and macro-level approaches” Ola Teige, Volda University College
11:15-12	Cont.	Cont.	Essay seminar	Essay seminar	Cont.
12:00-13:15	<b>Break</b>	<b>Break</b>	<b>Break</b>	<b>Break</b>	<b>Break</b>
13:15-14	<b>Walk and talk</b>	<b>Walk and talk</b>	<b>Walk and talk</b>	Round table	<b>Walk and talk</b>
14:15-15	Essay seminar	Essay seminar	Seminar 4 «Writing Methodology» by Karen Gram-Skjoldager	Cont.	Essay seminar

15:15-16	Lecture: “200 Years in the Making (i): Lineages of the Modern State” Stephan Sander-Faes, UiB	Essay seminar	Cont.	Plenary, with break out rooms	Concluding plenary
19-20:30			Social event		

**Abstracts for modules (reading lists and texts are available in Teams)**

***Seminar 1: discusses what role theory plays in historical writing and research***

**« How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Theory» by [Toufoul Abou-Hodeib](#)**

What is historical theory? How is it different from a theory or philosophy of history? And who needs theory when the facts can speak for themselves? Focusing specifically on social theory, this lecture looks at what role theory plays in history writing and research. Looking beyond what is regarded in the discipline as the empiricism/theory dichotomy, the lecture re-familiarizes the idea of theory by looking at some of the theories and concepts commonly taken for granted by historians. It further looks at how such assumptions influence both the selection and interpretation of facts. On the other side of this issue, several questions then arise: how does one link facts to theory without subordinating the former to the latter? What constitutes the starting point for thinking theoretically about one’s own work? And what relationship do sources, concepts, and theories have to each other? The lecture addresses these questions by looking at a text that crosses the disciplinary boundaries of history and the social sciences (Mitchell). The lecture concludes by looking at some of the methodological implications historical theory has for understanding the formation of an archive and for archival research.

**Lecture: introduces us to a particular historiography, in order to prepare for seminar 2.**

**“200 Years in the Making (i): Lineages of the Modern State” by Stephan Sander-Faes**

The study of state formation is often (usually) a rather unidimensional undertaking. Irrespective of the various trajectories of time and space, the overwhelming majority of scholarly writing on this subject being either circumscribed by often anachronistic present-day borders and/or, if comparative in nature, by focusing on this or that typically elite-centric aspect. In short: despite a vast amount of excellent scholarship, there is a great deal of opportunity to come up with something new, provided one dares to move “beyond” conventional wisdom. This lecture is divided into two parts: I will first discuss the overall structures European state formation from the late medieval period onwards; and then, second, move on to discuss the difficult question of how to identify and dis-entangle the various models that dominated scholarship throughout the Humanities and Social Sciences over the past generation. Both aspects combined serve as the foundation for any endeavour to contribute, in a meaningful way, to current debates on the subject matter.

**Seminar 2 dives into the readings to identify how scholars conceptualize and develop historical arguments**

**“200 Years in the Making (ii): Finding One’s Niche and Making the Most of It” by Stephan Sander-Faes**

Not all historiographical interpretations and models are created—and applied—equal. This applies, first and foremost, to “the modern state”. Well before German jurists conferred legal personhood onto “the state” in 1837, the study of humanity’s primary ruling organisation has been, and in all likelihood will remain, among the most widely diffused topics of enquiry. This particular emphasis makes its study such an intriguing—and problematic—field of research: there exists perhaps no other body of literature that is comparable in scale, scope, size.

While my lecture provided you with basic information about key terms, essential trends, and background on the historiography of state formation, this seminar will be more “hands-on”. Together, we will look at key texts to identify the most important concepts, their terminology, and, perhaps most importantly, we will try to identify the most (or least) useful aspects therein; and we will do so to address the following set of questions: how to find one’s niche? How to make one’s case? And what to do about it, esp. post-Ph.D. defence? The seminar will be organised in three parts: (i) a brief kick-off Q&A; (ii) a group-centric workshop; and (iii) a panel discussion about the way forward.

### ***Seminar 3: take up recent debates on ‘decolonization’ and related issues of research ethics***

#### **“De-Shamanizing Siberia” by Liudmila Nikanorova**

For this session, I invite fellow researchers to the conversation about Siberian shamanism. I will address the notions of ‘Siberia’ and ‘shamanism’ as colonial imaginaries and challenge them through a critical reading of scholarships about the area that has continuously attracted scholars and travellers in search for Siberian shamanism – Sakha Sire [Sa. ‘the Sakha Land’, also known as the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic]. English ‘Siberia’, as well as Russian *Сибирь*, are the colonial markers of Russian invasion beyond the Urals from the 16th century, which was the start of the long-lasting journey of the concept that continues to bear the burden of European thought and history to this day. In religious studies, Siberia rings immediately another key imaginary – shamanism. The term shaman was reserved to Siberian practitioners to mark their assumed ethnic and civilizational difference. Thus, shamanism became one of the imagined commonalities of the peoples grouped by Eurocentric thinkers into ‘tribal’, ‘primitive’, ‘aboriginal’, ‘indigenous’ peoples in English and *Naturvölker* (“in contrast” to European *Kulturvölker*). To this day, Sakha people are grouped by scholars into these categories and Sakha practitioners into a shaman in scholarships produced in non-Sakha languages. Inspired by the writings of scholars, who challenge universality of established Western colonial knowledges (L.T. Smith, W. Mignolo, C. Walsh, E. Said, I. Wallerstein), I will demonstrate how decolonial questions guide my investigation and reflect on the theoretical and methodological work behind the research.

### ***Seminar 4: is a hands-on module where students discuss and get practical advice on how to write methods sections***

#### **«Writing Methodology» by Karen Gram-Skjoldager, University of Aarhus**

A good dissertations includes a strong methods section that transforms the theoretical and historiographical assumptions and insights on which your thinking and writing is based into a concrete research design that also includes reflections on how the materials for your analysis have been selected and approached. In this seminar, we will discuss how you can build that bridge from theory to get-your-hands-dirty historical analysis. Based on a lecture that offers some (hopefully) useful tips and tricks for writing methodology, we will examine three examples of dissertation methods sections and use them as a starting point for discussing your research methods and how you present them in writing. *In the reading response for this seminar, I would like you to pick the dissertation excerpt that is closest to your dissertation (either in terms of topic or approach), read it, and reflect on three useful take-aways from this for your own methods chapter.*

### ***Seminar 5: demonstrate how historians theorize and bridges from theory to methods***

#### **“The study of informal relations and networks, and how this may help in integrating micro- and macro-level approaches” by Ola Teige**

Historical network analysis – the study of informal social relations or ties - is an approach that exists somewhere in the intersection of social history, political history and cultural history, even though it is originally inspired by sociology. All historians that look at societies and communities and how historical actors interact, as well as themes as politics, elites, local, national or international organizations etc., will at one point, implicitly or explicitly, have to perform some sort of network analysis or at least try to understand how informal social relations between their actors helped shape their object of study. It is rarely enough to understand their hierarchical and formal relations. In many cases informal relations as friendship, patron-client ties and the like, is key to understand a

phenomenon, in other they form good supplement to information found in official sources. Explicit network analysis can thereby help in casting light on traits of past societies that often have been under-communicated in the historiography.

How can one study informal relations as a historian? Does one use a quantitative approach as found in the sociological studies that inspired the use of the method also in history? And, is there also room for a more qualitative oriented approach? What types of informal relations can one say exists, and which aspects can one ascribe them? Finally, how can historians utilize networks and informal relations in their studies? Historians have used network analysis to collect data for comparisons, as well as highlight informal relations, and thereby making it possible to give a clearer and fuller picture of the social life and power dynamics of organizations and actors. The approach is also useful to help integrate micro- and macro-level approaches. The social ties and individual action between actors on the micro level can help in showing how larger social structures were created, reproduced and how they changed. How they played out in the relationships between actors over time.

The session will also discuss another approach/method/theoretical approach historians use to link actors, places and events on the micro, level, to the larger macro level. Both in the form of larger national, regional and even global studies, and studies of a more theoretical nature. Can historians by changing the scale of a study, so to speak 'zooming in and out', combine synthetic, larger level analysis with archive-based microstudies? Giovanni Levi argues that historians by doing this can "read through a microscope what was not evident on the surface". Or is the case, as Jan de Vries argues, that microhistories are not intended to aggregate to macro-level history, and the approach lacks a theoretical framework to make this move possible, "Put differently, if there were a theoretical framework for this purpose, microhistories would be 'case studies'".

### ***Seminar 6: discusses quantification and statistical thinking as methodological tools in the discipline of history***

«Numbers in history. History in Numbers» by [Camilla Brautaset](#)

When, where and why did quantification and statistical thinking become a widespread practice? How has quantitative sources, theories and methodologies influenced history as a discipline in general, and economic history in particular? In this seminar we will discuss numbers and history. We will discuss quantification as a practice and the rise of statistical thinking in the 19th century, but emphasis will be placed on the deployment of statistical sources and approaches in history writing in general and in economic history in particular in the 1960s and 1970s. What has happened to quantitative history writing since? Underpinning this discussion is the larger question if and if so, how, sources and methodology define disciplines?