Historical writing about everyday life

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‘Everyday life’ is an enigmatic term which eludes a straightforward or universal definition. The notion is less precise and more complicated than it looks. One reason may be that since ‘everyday life’ and the categories with which it is described are constituted within specific cultural and historical contexts, we face a host of (often contradictory) concepts. Yet all approaches to everyday life in contemporary historical writing do have something in common: a concern with the world of ordinary experience (as opposed to society in the abstract) as their point of departure, together with an attempt to view daily life as problematic, in the sense of showing that behaviour or values which are taken for granted in one society are dismissed as self-evidently absurd in another (cf. Burke 1991: 11).

For some time historians and social anthropologists have been trying to uncover the latent rules of daily life. The everyday includes actions, which could be defined as the ‘realm of routine’ (Braudel), and also attitudes, which may be labelled mental habits. Another important aspect in the context of everyday life is ritual. On the one hand, as a marker of special occasions in the life of individuals and communities, ritual is often defined in opposition to the everyday. On the other hand, outsiders and visitors notice everyday rituals such as ways of eating or forms of greeting in the life of every society, which the locals fail to perceive as rituals at all.

In this introduction we attempt, first of all, to present some general conceptual and methodological issues which have evolved around the concept of everyday life in European, especially German history. The German debate about ‘Alltag’ is illuminating, because the discussions have been conducted in an often fierce and ‘fundamentalist’ way and thus highlight a number of problems inherent in this notion. While the concept of ‘everyday life’ has provoked a widely recognized and often highly controversial debate in European and American history, it has hitherto been more or less neglected in the context of African history. Although, as will be shown, aspects of everyday life (especially for the colonial period) have recently received increased attention in historical writings on Africa, ‘everyday life’ as an analytical category has seldom found its way into current Africanist debates. Thus, in order to provide a more adequate framework for research into ‘everyday life in colonial Africa’, we will address some of the ‘achievements’ and ‘weaknesses’ of the everyday life concept that have been discussed in the context of European and North American history but not yet adequately taken up by Africanists.

1 Many of the various current meanings of ‘everyday life’ are discussed by Elias (1978). Elias distinguishes eight current meanings of the term, from private life to the world of ordinary people. See also Waldenfels (1985).
The issues discussed will include the problem of ‘representativity’, the relationship between ‘micro-’ and ‘macro-’ perspectives as well as the use of sources, especially (auto-) biographical material. Life stories, recounted or written down, rank high among the source materials relevant to the historical construction of everyday life, both in European and African contexts.

1. A shift in focus?

In recent decades various historiographical activities and trends have centred on the concept of everyday life. The phrase itself is fairly old: *la vie quotidienne* was the title of a series launched by the French publisher Hachette in the 1930s. In France the concept of social history designed by the *Annales* school incorporated from early on a focus upon everyday life. Braudel’s famous study of ‘material civilization’ (1967) constituted an important landmark.² In the United Kingdom, historical research on aspects of everyday life was initially linked with the concept of people’s history and the history workshop movement.³ In Germany a somewhat different approach, known as *Alltagsgeschichte*, has since the late 1970s placed everyday life on the agenda of historical research.⁴ More recently, the debate has broadened considerably, so that it now includes, for example, the history of experience(s) (‘*Erfahrungsgeschichte*’) and micro-history.⁵ Finally, the concept has become part of a more general debate about cultural history.⁶ There were numerous reasons for this shift, which reflects trends within historiography as well as general social experience.⁷ The approach to everyday life can be seen as a politically motivated movement in opposition to the ‘reigning authorities’, the academic establishment of historians. The political aspect has been expressed, among other things, through the perspective ‘from below’, that is the effort to analyse the experiences of ‘the mass of the people’ (Krantz 1988).

It would be misleading to summarize in a couple of phrases the central features of the scholarly (and semi-scholarly) literature about everyday life. Two aspects, however, seem important: first, the idea of a ‘meaningful construction of the worlds of living’ (Schütz 1974), the idea that daily practices follow logical and rational rules; and second, that social practice creates social structures.⁸ The individual is at the centre of attention.

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³ An important manifesto of this movement was Samuel (1981). See also the *History Workshop Journal*, published since 1975.
⁴ See among others Lüdtke (1995; German orig. 1989); Brüggemeier and Kocka (1985); Heer and Ullrich (1985); Schulze (1994); Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt (1994). While Hans-Ulrich Wehler, one of the fiercest critics of the concept of ‘everyday life’, is now even ready to write its obituary (Wehler 1998: 9), a number of other historians have tried to develop new perspectives, e.g. Sarasin (1996), Lüdtke (1997).
⁵ On micro-history see, for example, Levi (1991); Schlumbohm (1998); Medick (1992); Ginzburg (1993). For an impressive recent monograph based upon a micro-historical approach see Medick (1996).
⁷ There is no space here to discuss in detail this international trend in historical research, which on the one hand has been characterized by growing criticism of cliometrics and social history as structural history, on the other by a turn to the history of mentalities, to historical and social anthropology. Christian Meier refers to a general ‘waning of identification with larger units’ such as nations, states, trade unions and regards the turn to everyday life history as ‘grounded in specific social experiences in the present and immediate past’ (Meier 1990: 120).
⁸ This idea was influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*; see especially Bourdieu (1977, French orig. 1972).
Moreover, interest in everyday life and ‘micro-worlds’ has given new actors prominent roles on the historiographical stage: rebels and outlaws, slaves, maids and porters etc. One could also argue that the rise of women’s history has been closely linked with the ‘discovery’ of everyday life. Places hitherto avoided have moved to the centre of historical inquiry, for example workshop and bar, kitchen and streets. And the history of everyday life has fostered awareness of sources that were hitherto more or less neglected: first of all, oral history, but also photograph albums, diaries, letters, cookery books, jokes, to mention only a few. It has also proved possible to re-read certain kinds of official records in new ways, especially judicial records.

The use of oral sources illustrates the widespread ignorance with regard to related themes and methods in historical writing on everyday life. Though ‘oral history’ became for a while nearly synonymous with the history of everyday life, the related Africanist debates have hardly been mentioned, let alone discussed (e.g. Ritchie 1995; Thompson 1988; Perks and Thomson 1998), with the exception of Jan Vansina’s path-breaking work on oral tradition, which has had some impact on general debates about oral history. As Terence Ranger pointed out in 1978, non-Africanists easily assume that African history is always about ordinary people, while in fact it is mostly powerful élites who appear in oral traditions or act as informants. Moreover, historians dealing with the Western world have for a long time almost completely overlooked Africanist social anthropology, perhaps the dominant discipline within African studies, which regularly treated (admittedly for a long time in relatively ahistorical terms) themes later associated with ‘people’s history’, such as food, dress, age, death and rituals. On the other hand, as stated above, Africanist historians largely ignored the methodological debates about ‘everyday life’, though more recently aspects of ‘everyday life’ (especially for the colonial period) have received increased attention in historical writings on Africa. Before presenting examples of these works, some of the advantages and problems linked to an everyday-life approach will be discussed.

The concept of everyday life has received plaudits for a number of important insights. First of all, it has reminded us that people other than statesmen can act in significant and effective ways. Today it would be regarded as highly antiquated to present a given historical context exclusively as the interaction of structural parameters. Secondly, it has been shown that everyday life and daily procedures reflect the social order and make historical processes visible. In this context, Michel de Certeau outlined a ‘science of singularity’ which he defined as a

science of the relationships that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances. And only in the local network of labour and recreation can one grasp how, within a grid of socio-economic constraints, these pursuits unfailingly establish relational tactics (a struggle for

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9 See generally Scott (1988); for Africa see Hay and Stichter (1995).
10 Two famous books are based on judicial (or more precisely, inquisition) records: Le Roy Ladurie (1980); Ginzburg (1980).
12 Ranger (1978). There is the general problem that the sheer fact of working on African history is sufficient to qualify someone (or oneself) as ‘progressive’. See Miller (1999).
13 For a brief overview Moore (1994). The existing gulf between history and anthropology within African studies is discussed at length (bitterly, but effectively) by T.C. McCaskie in a number of articles. See especially McCaskie (1981). Lipp (1994: 78ff) notes that the older work of the German Volkskunde (now often re-labelled ‘European ethnology’) has also been ignored in current everyday life historiography in Germany.
14 See especially the recent debate between Sarasin (1996) and Lüdtke (1997).
life), artistic creations (an aesthetic), and autonomous initiatives (an ethic). The characteristically subtle logic of these ‘ordinary’ activities comes to light only in the details.\(^\text{15}\)

Thirdly, the history of everyday life has been able to show that ‘ordinariness’ is neither simple nor banal. The analysis of everyday life can enable us to uncover the ‘microphysics of power’, to use a Foucauldian term (e.g. Foucault 1977). In any case, it has helped to foster awareness of ambiguities and to undermine the master narratives of progress, rationality and modernization.

At the same time many of the strengths of the history of everyday life also represent weaknesses. The discovery of historical subjects, of ‘ordinary people’, has often been accompanied by a tendency to attribute to these subjects nearly unlimited power and autonomy.\(^\text{16}\) The ‘great men’ have been replaced by another cliché, that of smart and crafty rebels, who mastered their everyday life with supreme ease and were always ready to play a trick on the powerful. The worlds in which these ‘ordinary people’ lived have tended to be romanticized. More general political and social structures, including class and gender, have often been neglected in this context. At its worst, this approach has produced inductive empiricism and naïve positivism.

2. The search for representativity: microhistory and biography

The focus on everyday life has highlighted the eternal problem of micro- versus macro-perspectives (Alexander and Giesen 1987). Clearly, the ‘small world’ of everyday life is not autonomous but in various ways connected with the ‘large world’ of general political and socio-economic structures. Microhistory, ‘a sister, but not an identical twin of the history of everyday life’ (Hans Medick), can be seen as an analysis of historical facts which magnifies the scale of observation – similar to looking through a microscope in order to see if anything has been overlooked when observing with the naked eye. In defining microhistory (see especially Ginzburg 1993), one should emphasize the methodological and practical aspects as well as those concerning perspective. Moreover, microhistory is necessary for the analysis of historical reality where macrohistory has failed to identify the problems raised by the real dynamics of social systems or has fallen into tautologies and pre-established models of reference (see Schlumbohm 1998). The relationship between macrohistory and microhistory, in other words, is not an abstract problem about the possibility of constructing models and making comparisons. Because reality is, by definition, more complex than any system devised to describe it, the question arises as to what level of simplification is legitimate. This level can only be measured in terms of description, interpretation and prediction. While Ginzburg and others have stated that the main problem with macro-oriented analysis is the static structure of the models it proposes, in which an improbable coherence and linearity are ascribed to ongoing historical developments according to typical functionalist rules, micro-history entails the danger that it may focus on singular phenomena without taking into consideration the context; it cannot see the wood for the trees. There have been numerous efforts to mediate between the extremes. David Eltis and David Richardson, for instance, welcome work on the personal experiences of slaves while stressing that ‘it is difficult to assess the significance or representativity of personal narratives or collective


\(^{16}\) Scott (1985), a work which has been often quoted in African studies, is not free from these tendencies.
biographies, however detailed, without an understanding of the overall movements of slaves of which these individuals’ lives were a part” (Eltis and Richardson 1997: 3).

This leads us to the problem of ‘representativity’, which in turn is linked to the place of biography in the historiography of everyday life. It has been argued that a biographical approach shows a way out of the dualistic dead-end of subject versus society, of individual versus structure, because a biography is conceptualized as a social construct which constitutes social reality as well as the subject’s worlds of knowledge and experience. This social construct permanently transforms itself within the dialectical relationship between biographical experiences and knowledge on the one hand and general social patterns on the other (Rosenthal 1995). People receive biographical attention for two reasons: either because they are considered important or exceptional or because they are deemed to stand for, or represent, a category of people, such as – in the African context – peasants, slaves, workers, sharecroppers. The latter category has received biographical treatment – mostly in the form of a subset of biography, the life story – as typical representatives of so-called ordinary people. The concepts of exceptionality and representativity which distinguish the two kinds of biography are aligned on the one hand with agency – i.e. dealing with men of action, men of importance, public men – and on the other with structure and material conditions, such as the peasantry and the working class, that situate and subsume so-called ordinary people. Just as it is more difficult to prove representativity than exceptionality, it is always hard to capture the ‘voices’ of the oppressed, the ‘ordinary’, the exploited – and to find resistance in those voices, in order to produce agents out of structures. The whole concept of representativity requires further thinking. There seem to be severe limitations inherent in the dichotomous characterizations of conventional biographical forms, insofar as they have to be either extraordinary or representative. Maybe this contradictoriness of perspectives is something we just have to live with.

Biographies were the central genre of historicism during the nineteenth century; great men were thought to make history, and thus the specific conditions of an historical epoch could be condensed in an individual destiny. Confidence in this approach has been severely shaken since the nineteenth century; yet the old desire to grasp complex reality in the mirror of an individual existence has by no means lost its fascination. Numerous methods of reconstructing life stories have been developed over recent years. Not only are biographical sources used as sources of information: biographies are also analysed as social constructs or as specific social realities. The latter approach analyses the social function of biographies and the social processes of its constitution. The term ‘biography’ is as complex as ‘everyday life’. It is simply impossible to describe ‘(the) life’. Any reconstruction is selective; it is driven by specific motives, objectives, systems of values, and is filtered by the respective state of mind and life situation of the author and/or the recipients. The mode of self-portrayal, the choice of plot references, the qualification and quantification of time, the relation between concealed, encoded and openly presented events and their individual interpretation are constituted within specific cultural and individual contexts.

17 The following paragraph draws upon Geiger (1996).
18 This problem is also at the core of the Subaltern Studies project. See Chaturvedi (2000).
19 See for the German debate among many others Fuchs (1984); Gestrich et al. (1988); Kohli (1978); Kohli and Roberts (1984); Kohli (1985); Warneken (1985).
In African studies, especially in anthropology, there is an ongoing debate about ‘biography’. Besides issues concerning the collection of biographical material and the creation of bibliographical archives the discussion has focussed upon ‘social biography’, life stories and ‘personal narratives’. Charles van Onselen’s monumental life story of a South African sharecropper (1996), was preceded by a supporting methodological article (1993), in which van Onselen reflected upon the use of oral testimony in order to reconstruct a life story for which there are no written documents. Neither in this article nor in the book, however, does van Onselen conceptualize ‘everyday life’, though his monograph is actually an account of one man’s daily life. The same applies to other important studies of rural South Africa, based upon oral testimony.

If we turn to Central Africa, Landeg White’s book on Magomero (1987) offers an exciting ‘inside’ view of social, political and economic change in Malawi, seen through the lives of individuals, of ‘ordinary’ men and women between the 1850s and 1980s. But White too refused to reflect on the dimensions of ‘everyday life’ inherent in his approach. The social biographies of families presented by Werbner (1991) and Ranger (1995) depict in a more complex way through their dynamic perspective of the family’s transformation and their conflicts over time the worlds in which these families lived. This complexity becomes apparent especially in the form of nuances and shades of social behaviour through which the discrepancies between norms and social practices come to the fore.

Although all these books, as well as some others, could be subsumed under the heading of Alltagsgeschichte, the only work which has hitherto conceptualized such a category is the Comaroffs’ controversial study of the encounter between missionaries and Africans in South Africa, which argues that the evangelists’ most important aim was ‘to reform the everyday life of Southern Tswana’. This leads them to a more general conclusion:

the very significance of the quotidian lies in its paradoxes, in its absent present. It is [...] the ‘naturalized habit’ of the modern subject [...] it was precisely by means of the residual, naturalized quality of habit that power takes up residence in culture, insinuating itself, apparently without agency, in the texture of a life-world. This, we believe, is why recasting mundane, routine practices has been so vital to all manner of social reformers, colonial missionaries among them (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 30-31).

While the Comaroffs convincingly stress ‘the extraordinary place of the ordinary’ in colonial Africa, they hardly discuss the methodological implications of this claim or the problem of sources that it raises. Nevertheless, their book may be seen as the most thoughtful contribution to Alltagsgeschichte so far published in the realm of African historical anthropology.

3. The papers in this volume

Insofar as historians of Africa are ‘trained’ at all, they are certainly not trained to study the history of everyday life. Indeed, for a long time this was a field over which anthropologists claimed a virtual monopoly. Thus it is interesting to see what sort of

20 A good overview is provided by Paul (1996); see also Okely and Callaway (1992). One of the most famous life stories from Africa is Shostak (2000). For a subtle critique of this book see Clifford (1986: 103ff).


22 See, for example, the articles by John Middleton and O.F. Raum in Harlow and Chilver (1965), or by Max Gluckman, Elizabeth Colson, Aidan Southall and others in Turner (1971).
topics are chosen when historians are asked to write on this topic. The papers published here are based on those presented at a symposium held at the University of Leipzig in October 1998. We have divided them into two broad categories: those which ponder over the availability of sources and the methodology for handling them, and those which describe from an historical perspective a particular aspect of everyday life in one colony.

3.1 Sources and methods

MARCIA WRIGHT’s chapter on what is now a part of southwestern Tanzania represents an historian’s attempt to go beyond the various paradigms that have dominated the description of one ‘everyday’ activity of the pre-colonial and colonial period, the production of iron. She criticizes those who have generalized about the ‘destruction’ of iron production by colonialism and in particular those ethno-archaeologists who have limited their field of study to technology in the narrow sense of ‘a set of mechanisms and techniques’. In both cases, she argues, there is a danger of neglecting twentieth-century change and the role of individuals. Her own approach, based partly on a critical reading of the contemporary ethnographic writings of colonial officials and missionaries but primarily upon interviews with one master iron-smelter concerning his experiences between 1931 and 1956, results in a more subtle and less static picture. She contrasts the demonstration of smelting (including associated rituals) performed for colonial administrators and other researchers with the living tradition of ‘technology’ in the broadest sense, encompassing ‘the channelling of power, physical labour, other energy sources, and spiritual forces’.

Oral sources of a somewhat different nature are discussed in CHRISTINE HARDUNG’s contribution, which deals with slaves of the Fulbe in northern Dahomey (today Bénin). Having established that the answers given by colonial officials to questionnaires in the first decade of the twentieth century are not very helpful when looking at slaves’ living conditions, she turns to the oral narratives of old people who were formerly slaves. While recognising the methodological problems involved in relying upon the recollections of ‘those who would rather forget’, she shows how in such circumstances body language can itself constitute a form of memory. Her conclusion – on the need to take present-day social realities into account when drawing upon remembered histories of life in the colonial period – is of relevance to all kinds of work on everyday life.

This applies even to photographs, a source discussed by PAUL JENKINS. Drawing upon lessons learnt from many years’ work on the Basel Mission’s photograph collection, he singles out two photographs for discussion – one, of poor technical quality, apparently showing an African ritual being conducted upon the birth of a European child at a mission station in Cameroon, the other being of a missionary headmistress in what is now Ghana, crocheting together with African members of staff. Instead of proceeding to other photographs, as most of us would do, Jenkins subjects these two examples to a detailed analysis. In the first case, he shows that the photograph acquires value as a source for the history of everyday life mainly because of the ‘flanking information’ (oral and written) that is available. In the second case, far more visual information is conveyed than would have been possible in a ‘word document’.

3.2 Celebration, Modernity and Power

At first glance, the remaining papers have little in common. Not only do they refer to different parts of Africa (West, Central, East and Southern): the topics covered range from mission to football, from power to celebration. They are all about (parts of) the colonial period; but whilst for some authors this is merely a matter of periodization
(‘everyday life under colonialism’), for others it is a phenomenon unique to colonial rule (‘kolonialer Alltag’, as opposed to pre- or postcolonial everyday life). One might even question their relevance to the topic of everyday life, since all of them to some degree deal with extraordinary events (church services, festivals, law cases), extraordinary objects (crucifixes, motor cars, trumpets) and extraordinary people (catechists, chiefs, entrepreneurs, newspaper editors). We are clearly a long way from the ‘history from below’, ‘people’s history’ or ‘history of ordinary people’ that was demanded by many critical Africanist historians in the 1970s and 1980s and has sometimes been considered synonymous with the history of everyday life. Nor can it be claimed that the papers are exclusively or even primarily about Africans: in each, as in the colonial history that was written before decolonization, Europeans occupy at least as prominent a position as Africans.

These negative statements nevertheless contain a hint of what the papers do have in common. It is through looking at the extraordinary, at élites and at interaction with Europeans that we can best begin to understand what it meant to be an African living in a European colony. The fact that all of the papers to some extent deal with celebration – be it of God, speed, power or whatever – is surely significant. Virtually all of them also touch upon the question of (European) modernity, defined by the Comaroffs as ‘an ideological formation in terms of which societies valorize their own practices by contrast to the spectre of barbarism and other marks of negation’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 32). And all of them link celebration and modernity with questions relating to power, hegemony and the need for a certain degree of consent – not merely in relations between the tiny European minority and the large African majority, but also within African societies.

Phyllis Martin’s contribution, based on the records of a French Catholic mission station on the coast of Gabon, describes how European missionaries (men and women) sought to shape the physical and spiritual environment in which they settled and thus to challenge existing ‘maps of power’. Despite their ability to create sacred spaces and processions which echoed those of European Catholicism, the missionaries proved singularly unable to deal effectively with death, which weakened the mission’s capacity to reproduce itself.

A similar focus upon the paradoxes which colonial power entailed may be found in Erdmute Alber’s chapter on the introduction of motor-cars into the French colony of Dahomey (today Bénin) during the First World War. Cars, almost like the sacred statues described by Martin, fascinated both Europeans and Africans on account of the (new) power that they embodied. But whereas the saints’ statues were in principle there for all to admire in an equal manner, cars could be owned by a few persons and admired by everyone else, resulting in a dualism which has survived to today. Alber describes how French officials used cars as an enticement with which to capture the attention of African chiefs and turn their energy to good use, yet at the same time tried to ensure that the very same cars would remain entirely in their own hands.

Just as the colonial public who lined the roads to admire the first cars in Dahomey were stage-managed, so too was the exercise of power in what is today Tanzania, where the Germans’ symbolic display of power centred around a new – though pseudo-traditional – institution, the Shauri. In a paper which in some respects echoes the ideas of Terence Ranger concerning Southern Rhodesia, Jan-Georg Deutsch discusses the manner in which the Germans administered law before the First World War and succeeded in gaining a degree of consent for their actions in the public sphere. Thus
colonial practices and institutions gradually began to look familiar: they developed roots which extended into the everyday life of both rulers and the ruled.

JAN-BART GEwald’s contribution on the Herero of what is today Namibia brings missionaries on to the stage once again, this time – rather like the colonial officials described by Alber – as bearers of the symbols of modernity who resisted African efforts to appropriate such symbols for their own purposes. On the one hand, missionaries fostered the adoption of ‘civilized’ clothes, trumpets and so forth; on the other, they objected to the use of top hats (inappropriate for subaltern classes) or to the adaptation of musical instruments for dance bands. One of the key arenas in which appropriation, contestation and transculturation between Herero and missionaries took place was, as in Martin’s paper on Loango, that of death: in funerals, where missionaries strove to make behaviour more ‘dignified’, and in commemorations of the dead – a new custom, partly influenced by European models yet soon perceived as a ‘traditional’ part of Herero culture.

The notion of commemoration leads us to the final case study in this collection, that of ODILE GOERG, who describes the thirty-year history of an annual commemorative festival in the West African city of Freetown. Here too we are presented with a set of deep ironies: the festival was a spontaneous African celebration, yet the action it celebrated was that of a British governor, who had abolished an unpopular tax. It became a regular part of the calendar and hence of everyday life; yet instead of simply being reproduced from year to year, its meaning shifted in the course of time: in the 1870s it was primarily an expression of gratitude, but by the late 1880s it had been transformed into a form of protest against new tax proposals. At the same time the festival highlighted the changing nature of Krio society, with a growing gulf emerging between the élite – who came to support direct taxation as a step towards self-government – and the masses.

3.3 Conclusion

Why everyday life? Does it make sense to introduce this category into the study of colonial Africa? Whilst the quotidianist perspective does not necessarily yield radically new insights into Africa’s colonial history, the essays in this book demonstrate that such a perspective does require a shift of emphasis on the part of Africanist historians. First, it was primarily the subtle changes in everyday life that determined the manner in which modern Africa emerged; secondly, this perspective obliges us to transcend the dichotomy between colonizers and colonized, viewing them rather as part of the same analytical field; and thirdly, writing the history of everyday life requires us to think in open systems, in which historians deal with a multitude of competing versions of history. This polyphony can be welcomed: everyday-life history shows that it is possible to live with contradictions without falling into the arbitrariness of postmodernism.

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