Defining leisure in London, 1760-1820 (abstract)

Benjamin Heller
“Defining leisure in London: vocabulary and the use of time 1760-1820”

This paper will examine the use of non-working time in London during the reign of George III. Diaries written by a broad range of London residents—including carpenters, schoolboys, merchants, aristocratic ladies and young politicians—will provide the source material. The findings relate to two topics that emerge from this examination: the vocabularies of non-work time and patterns of time use. While historians have thought about leisure in the Georgian period, it has been treated as an anachronistic, ahistorical concept. I improve our understanding of the language used to denote activities freely undertaken for enjoyment. In the second section of my paper I examine patterns of time use to create a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between work, unpaid obligation and freely chosen activities amongst different classes and genders. This approach offers an avenue for creating a more nuanced history of leisure in London that recognizes the importance of activities that have been overlooked in favor of better-documented venues such as pleasure gardens or the theatre. In addition, a study of diaries reveals the complexity of the motivations and tastes of Londoners in ways that previous histories of metropolitan leisure have not.