Call for Papers

Moral Values and Political Action: Tensions and Instrumentalizations throughout History

International conference (primarily but not exclusively for PhD students and postdoctoral researchers)

17–18 June 2027

Venue

University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Pilsen, Czech Republic

Organizers

Association for Political History (APH), University of Geneva: Department of General History, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen: Faculty of Arts: Department of Historical Sciences

Conference rationale

In History's Moral Turn (2008), George Cotkin argues that morality has never been absent from historical practice, even when historians have sought to exclude explicit moral judgment in the name of objectivity. Moral values, he suggests, are embedded in historical narration, political action, collective memory, and the very language through which historical actors and historians alike make sense of the world. Rather than providing clear answers, moral inquiry in history exposes tensions and ambiguities, shaped by contingency and the social actors themselves.

Nearly two decades later, both the world historians study and the conditions under which they study it have changed profoundly. Recent events – such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the intensification of the climate emergency with its growing emphasis on individual and collective responsibility, the increasing legitimacy claimed by "alternative truths" in political discourse, or the assertion by Donlad Trump that he doesn't need international law because only his own morality would restrain him – have reconfigured the relationship between moral values and political action.

At the same time, the historiographical landscape has shifted. The traditional ideal of scholarly distance and emotional detachment has been increasingly challenged. In many fields – postcolonial studies, gender history, Indigenous studies, environmental history, memory studies, and the history of violence – the proximity of the researcher to the object of study is now seen by many as a source of epistemic legitimacy rather than bias. This raises renewed questions about moral engagement, responsibility, and the role of the historian as witness, participant, or implicated subject.

In the light of these global and historiographical shifts, this conference proposes to examine the relationship between moral values and political action across historical contexts. Moral values may inspire political engagement, legitimize authority, justify violence, or serve as instruments of domination. At the same time, political action frequently reshapes, constrains, or corrodes moral commitments, producing paradoxes, moral blind alleys, and unintended consequences.

Simultaneously, insights from political theory – particularly constructivist approaches in international relations – offer useful but contested conceptual tools for historical inquiry. Constructivist scholars, most notably Alexander Wendt, have argued that moral values and norms can shape political actors' identities and expectations, thereby contributing to the stabilization of political orders and patterns of cooperation.

For historians, these debates offer a lens to explore how moral frameworks are constructed, contested, and mobilized in specific political contexts. Examining selective application, or failure of moral norms under conditions of crisis, asymmetrical power, or perceived existential threat can enrich historical analysis without imposing a predetermined theoretical model. By engaging in such perspectives, the conference invites participants to reflect on how moral values have shaped political action historically, how actors navigated moral dilemmas, and how historians themselves interpret and sometimes influence these dynamics.

Key themes and questions

We welcome proposals that may address, from a political-historical perspective, one or more of the following issues:

- Moral values as languages of political power How have states, political leaders, parties and movements mobilized moral values (justice, security, freedom, dignity, evil, responsibility) to legitimize authority, war, violence, or reform?

- Moral urgency and political decision-making How do situations framed as emergencies – war, ecological/economic crisis, security threats –reshape the moral horizons of political actors and justify exceptional measures?

- Religious vs. Political moral values How do political and religious values interact in the construction of political order, and through what processes do they complement, reinforce, challenge, or compete with one another?
- Instrumentalization, polarization, and moral "absolutism" How do political actors use moral claims to simplify complex situations, delegitimize opponents, or close down democratic debate?
- Responsibility, agency, and constraint in political action How can political historians assess responsibility when decisions are made under
- structural constraints, institutional or physical pressures, claims of necessity, or because they are convinced that there is no alternative?
- Truth and moral authority in politics How do competing truth claims and "alternative facts" interact with moral legitimacy in political regimes in the past?
- The historian of politics as moral and political actor What does it mean to write political history when historians themselves are politically implicated in the events, institutions, or regimes they study? How does proximity affect moral judgment and scholarly authority?
- Revisiting moral detachment in political history Is Cotkin's call for moral humility and complexity still adequate in contexts marked by war, democratic erosion, "alternative truths" or ecological collapse?

Disciplinary scope

This conference is primarily addressed to scholars working in:

- Political history (all periods and regions)
- History of the state, institutions, and governance
- History of political ideologies and movements
- War, diplomacy, and international relations (historical perspectives)

Comparative, transnational, and interdisciplinary approaches are welcome insofar as they encompass political history.

Format and submission guidelines for papers

- Please submit an abstract of 200–300 words, clearly outlining the political-historical question, sources, and argument.
- Kindly send us a short CV (no more than 1 page).
- Submissions should be sent to: Jaroslav Valkoun (valkoun@ff.zcu.cz) and Irène Herrmann (irene.herrmann@unige.ch)
- Deadline for proposals: 15 November 2026
- Notification of acceptance: 31 January 2027

Selected papers may be considered for publication in an edited volume or a special journal issue.

Practical considerations

Participants are expected to cover their own travel and accommodation expenses. However, the APH may contribute a limited amount toward the costs of participants who can prove that their home institution is unable to cover these costs.