

How to decolonize political history?

APH Conference, Antwerp, 18-20 June 2025

Call for papers

In the light of current geopolitical constellations, the contemporary resonance of political history seems more relevant than ever. At the same time, the subdiscipline of political historiography has struggled to maximize its global relevance and to overcome its own historical biases. One of the longstanding critiques of the field has targeted its elitist character. It was written by North Atlantic elites about North Atlantic elites, about the institutions they had created and the struggles they waged. New forms of history-writing that came into being since the last decades of the nineteenth century were meant to be more democratic alternatives to political history. When political history was reinvented at universities in the North Atlantic world since the 1990s, this reproach of elitism was addressed. 'The political' which became the object of the new political history was not the realm of the rich and mighty, but involved all aspects of life in which power relations are somehow negotiated.

Still, this renewal of political historiography largely took place within the boundaries of the North Atlantic world, and therefore tended to replicate its fundamental paradigms. This did not exclude a growing interest for colonization and decolonization as political processes, but the subdiscipline did hardly question its origins in an era of colonialism, and the stamp it still carries from them. The decolonization of history-writing, therefore, has mainly taken place outside the 'new political history', even if it is intrinsically a political undertaking. Subaltern studies, gender history, new imperial history, area studies are some of the fields where the decolonizing efforts have been made – much less so in political history strictly speaking.

The aim of this conference is precisely to catch up with this delay, and to ask what it can mean to decolonize the field of political history. Should it only mean that we study processes of political decolonization, or does such an approach, on the contrary, perpetuate the focus on the colonizer? Should decolonizing political history entail a focus on pre-colonial political structures and actors, and how they survived during and/or after the colonial period? Or should it also make us question the ways in which we tackle political history in the North Atlantic world, both in modern and early modern times? Is every attempt to view political history from the perspective of non-hegemonic groups a form of historiographical decolonization? And if we answer positively to that last question, wouldn't that devalue the term decolonization as such? Is 'decolonization' the most appropriate paradigm to renew the field of political history, or do we need other concepts?

Rather than theoretical answers to these questions, we expect to gain insights in this matter through empirical and methodological approaches. We hope to receive papers in which authors present the results of their historical research through the lens of these questions, and by doing so reflect on the possibilities and the limits of a decolonizing approach for political historiography. Of particular interest are papers in which the methodological and infrastructural challenges for this approach are being tackled. Questions that have been at the core of other subdisciplines deserve to be treated from a political history perspective. What kind of sources should we use to uncover power relationships in nonliterate societies? To which degree and in which ways can we use concepts from North Atlantic societies to describe pre-colonial political realities? How can we overcome language gaps? Which contributions can scholars from other disciplines offer to the decolonization of political history? How can we stimulate collaboration between scholars from

different parts of the world in order to genuinely practice what Carola Dietze has called a “history on equal terms”?

We welcome proposals both for individual papers and for full panels (3-5 papers). These panels can be dedicated to specific regions, periods and/or topics, or they can focus on conceptual or methodological challenges. Potential titles of panels include “Decolonizing the Cold War”, “The persistence of pre-colonial political structures”, “Decolonial epistemologies”. We encourage the submission of panel proposals which do not exclusively consist of presenters from the North Atlantic, and we would be glad to receive proposals in which decolonial perspectives are applied to ongoing conflicts. We expect the proposals in English, but we promote multilingualism and linguistic flexibility during the panels.

Doctoral students and junior scholars are warmly encouraged to submit proposals. For doctoral scholars whose proposals are accepted, a preparatory webinar will be organized in spring. In this preparatory seminar, first drafts can be discussed, and suggestions with regard to the presentations will be offered.

Paper proposals should not exceed 500 words. Panel proposals should contain, moreover, an introduction of maximum 500 words, in which a rationale is given for bringing these specific papers together. Please send your proposals by 10 February at the latest to marnix.beyen@uantwerpen.be. The organizers will put everything to work to make the conference affordable and accessible for all participants.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Roland Ndille (Buea University), Jihane Sfeir (Université Libre de Bruxelles), Musa Sroor (Birzeit University), Adriana Salay (Universidade de São Paulo)

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