

First announcement

International conference: The State of the Art in the History of Politics

30 November – 1 December 2017, The Hague

Organized by the National Research School for Political History OPG

Conference team: Mieke Aerts, Marnix Beyen, Stefan Couperus, Liesbeth van de Grift, Ido de Haan, Leonard van 't Hul, Harm Kaal, Ronald Kroeze, Dries Raeymaekers, Pieter Slaman, Margit van der Steen and Henk te Velde.



On the occasion of the start of its second lustrum, the National Research School for Political History OPG will organize an international conference to discuss the state of the art in the history of politics. The central issue for this conference will be the question what is common between the many approaches to the history of politics that have bloomed in the past decades. Does political history still have a core of shared topics, problems and concepts, or is the field fragmented into a wide array of studies on things political? We aim to answer these questions from an intellectual as well as a practical perspective: What do we mean when we study politics? And what are promising new direction for political historians to work on together?

The state of political history

Since the 1980s, political history as a historical sub-discipline has gone through a series of reinventions, each of which can be considered as attempts to define the specificity of an approach to history that for a long time was equated with history per se. It was only after the rise of social, economic and cultural history, that political history came to be viewed as a part, yet not the whole of history, which moreover had failed to compete with other approaches due to its elitist, superficial, and narrowly national perspective. In response to these challenges, many of the historians who persisted in their interest in things political, have made huge strides in renewing the field, first of all by embracing the particularity of a history focused on politics: the political now came to be understood as a domain or aspect of society with its own historical development.

Approaching the political as a specific historical phenomenon enabled its historians to reintegrate elements from competing sub-disciplines: intellectual history high-lighted the changing conceptualizations of the political; cultural history offered insights on the nature of specific and changing cultures, traditions, repertoires and styles of politics; neo-institutional social and economic theory contributed to a renewal of an interest in distinctly political institutions like the state, constitutions and regimes. Each of these innovations also contributed to a rethinking of the national state as the self-evident context of historical research; while more traditional political historians still may struggle with the odium of tediousness, those who are more à la mode recognize the political in every aspect of global, local, transnational and transversal history, while also the historians of emotions, the environment, the autobiographical or the technological easily acknowledge the political dimensions of their objects of interest.

Questions for historians of the political

Considering these remarkable changes, it may now be the time to present an overview of the state of the art in the history of politics and to ask the question what it is that binds the historians of the political in their common endeavor. What are the main topics, puzzles, questions and methods that have evolved over the last couple of years? Does a history of politics dissolve in a series of disparate domains – from the politics of identity to the politics of science; from the politics of style to the politics of memory? Or is there still a core of political history – a focus on power, authority, legitimacy, participation, representation, or deliberation; or on the political as an agonistic field of friends and foes, defined in the extreme by the use of violence?

Or more pragmatically: what are the main topics that historians of politics are currently involved in: democracy, collective violence, social movements, state formation? And even more down to earth: which places and times are the object of interest of historians of politics – is it still the nation state, or is it the local, the transnational, or the global; old and new cities, regions, empires, or international institutions like the United Nations? Is it only the most contemporary history, or also earlier times; good old ‘*histoire événementielle*’ or also developments that last longer than yesterday’s news?

Finally, this also involves the political nature of the history of politics. Like any other discipline within the humanities, history is a discipline of considered and contested prejudices, that are only overcome by systematic questioning the limits of our understanding. Yet historians of politics might be distinctly aware of the political mechanisms that are at work in the construction of these limitations, including their own role in legitimating or criticizing the political assumption of their own time and that of their predecessors. So what is the political nature of a history of politics, especially now that we all are supposed to focus on impact and social value of our scholarly work?

Intellectual and practical aims

These are the questions that we want to address in a conference aimed to map the state of the art in the history of politics. While a primary goal of the conference is to enhance our self-understanding, and to offer all of us who are embroiled in our specific topic a chance to get a quick overview of the terrain we all are treading, a further goal is to explore new opportunities for research and collaboration, most of all to scholars of a younger generation who look for ways to create new routes through uncharted territory. In this way, we hope to contribute to the main goal of the National Research School for Political History OPG, which is to function as a platform for training of researchers and for the development of research on political history in the Netherlands and abroad, both for upcoming and for established historians of the political.

Form of the conference

Given these intellectual and practical aims, we propose a meeting with a more practical focus than regular historical conference. Instead of a series of lectures of papers on specific topics, we hope to invite a series of debates to evaluate the current state of the art, as well as to create platforms to talk about collaboration in future projects. In order to achieve these goals, we will organize this conference along three separate lines: debates, presentations, proposals, spread over two days.