

Call for Abstracts for History and Theory Theme Issue

History and Ethics

Guest editors: João Ohara and Andre Freixo

In 2024, 20 years will have passed since the publication of both *History and Theory's* theme issue on "Historians and Ethics" and *The Ethics of History*, a volume edited by David Carr, Thomas R. Flynn, and Rudolf A. Makkreel. It is now time to revisit the topic and consider it in the light of a different social, political, and intellectual landscape altogether - a task the world's current struggles make even more urgent.

Though battles over the past(s) and its meanings are nothing new, other voices have emerged in the public arena. In their 2018 manifesto, "Theses on Theory and History", Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Scott, and Gary Wilder relaunched a debate some considered outdated: they called for us to rethink the theoretical core and the very foundations of historiography in the contemporary world. As they argue, "all history is a history of our present time", and critical history can contribute immensely to our understanding of the dominant discourses of the present. It can also contribute to re-imagining and reshaping configurations of power and knowledge, present, past, and future. Among other things, the authors have drawn our attention to the importance of ethics in such critical history, and by doing so, the questions of otherness and difference have returned anew. These Other voices made visible the acts of violence, physical, symbolic, and otherwise, that certain emplotments of past events can perpetuate in the "modernist" approach to history.¹

References to the judgment of "History" (always in a redeeming future) abound, as Joan Scott has recently highlighted. Expressions like "the right" or "the wrong" side(s) of history seem to have made a significant comeback in many ways and all around the globe. Amidst all this, historians have been increasingly targeted by ultranationalist, populist, and authoritarian governments as a threat to a supposed entitlement to the nation's pride and identity over its (mythologized) national past. All this suggests that there is something more to history than making truthful and trustworthy statements

¹ The manifesto as well as many critical short articles on the *theses* are available at the forum for critical thoughts hosted by *History of the Present* website: <https://www.historyofthepresent.org/forum.html>, last accessed on June 21st, 2022.

and interpretations about past events, or even that “telling truths about the past(s)” involves more than just the epistemological dimension.² Nevertheless, as Indrani Chatterjee argued:

the critical decolonization of historical writing requires a greater range of philosophical reference points, the willingness to treat time in nonlinear fashion, to amplify and diversify the archive rather than to abjure it, and to abandon the thirst for mastery of data that was driven into some of us to the point of silencing critique. But, if we are to free ourselves of fear, all of us require equitable and secure working conditions for the production of original narratives and historical analyses. That is ultimately what keeps us all, and not just in the American academe, from being decolonial historians.³

Back in 2004, the editors of *History and Theory* proposed a theme issue about “the relationship between historians, the practice of history, and questions of ethics”.⁴ In his introduction, Brian Fay noted that the number of responses and their intensity signaled the great urgency these issues held at the time. The wide range of angles and approaches that the authors explored was also striking. From the duties and obligations that historians ought to abide by to the place and the role of historiography in a multicultural world, the published essays made it evident that knowledge of the past(s) is often entangled with existential questions, i.e. the values and expectations of the living. And then what ethical or moral questions could be specific to historians (as historians) and their practices? As Jonathan Gorman argued at the time, they presumably already share duties and obligations with others - as humans, citizens, and scholars, beyond the deontological aspects of the profession.⁵ Historians ought not to lie, plagiarize, or engage in other fraudulent practices, but then so do many other professionals.⁶ And of course, some kind of ethical conduct can be codified in a document, as has already been done in some places.

² See, for instance, Donald Bloxham. *History and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), and Marnie Hughes-Warrington and Anne Martin. *Big and Little Histories: Sizing Up Ethics in Historiography* (London: Routledge, 2022).

³ Indrani Chatterjee, “Whose history? What Theory?: A post-colonial response”, https://www.historyofthepresent.org/forum/l_Chatterjee_Whose_History.pdf, last accessed on June 21st, 2022.

⁴ Brian Fay, Historians and Ethics: A Short Introduction to the Theme Issue. *History and Theory* 43, no. 4 (2004), 1-2.

⁵ Jonathan Gorman, Historians and Their Duties. *History and Theory* 43, no. 4 (2004), 103-117.

⁶ See Arthur Assis, Objectivity and the First Law of History Writing. *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 13, no. 1, 2019.

Antoon de Baets' work on cases of censorship, persecution, and even death threats to (or the assassination of) historians by authoritarian or pseudo-democratic regimes becomes even more important in the post-2016 world of post-truth, "fake news", alt-right historical denialism, and far-right populisms running rampant. Normativity is needed, of course, but De Baets' work allows us to understand that no normativity can prevent the abuses of history or the violent control over the writing of history. Historians do not deal with other people's lives and deaths, hopes and sufferings in the abstract; historians share with them their very human condition: they are citizens themselves, with fragile and vulnerable bodies as well.⁷ Does this entail that historians have a kind of moral debt to those who they study, or for whom they write?⁸ Discussions of historical reparation and intergenerational justice suggest that, contrary to the traditional Western intuition, the living might indeed have to deal with the legacy of past violence, injustice, and exploration. And all over the world, victims of horrors old and new spoke up and increasingly demanded not only to be heard but to participate in the ensuing debates.⁹

We now invite prospective authors to engage with questions raised by the entanglement between history (in its multiple senses) and ethics. Some suggested questions for this theme issue include, but are not limited to, the following:

- How do values relate to our claims to knowledge of the past(s)? Conversely, how does our knowledge of the past(s) relate to present values?
- How do Decolonial theories contribute to rethinking ethics and welcoming others into the realms of history and theory of history?
- What are the ethical challenges of history beyond the realms of professional historiography, such as with public and digital history, digital archives,

⁷ Antoon de Baets, *Crimes Against History* (London and New York, Routledge, 2019).

⁸ See Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Anton Froeyman, *History, Ethics, and the Recognition of the Other: A Levinasian View on the Writing of History* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁹ E.g., Stefan Berger and Wulf Kansteiner, editors. *Agonistic Memory and the Legacy of 20th Century Wars in Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). See also Michael Rothberg. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) and Carolyn Dean. *The Moral Witness: Trials and Testimony after Genocide* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

historical internet sites, marketplace strategies, and companies that profit from the consumption of historical data?

- What kinds of commitments are involved in producing “reliable knowledge” of the past(s)? Are these commitments incompatible with or exclusionary of other engagements (e.g., museums, exhibitions, general public/wider audiences events, social media productions, etc.) and responsibilities?
- What virtues (moral and epistemic) ought historians cultivate to be reliable interpreters of the past(s)? And what vices ought they to avoid?
- Are contemporary references to “History’s judgment” or “History’s lessons” different from their classical iterations? What do these expressions mean today?
- What is at stake when we discuss “the morals of history”?
- How could or should we deal with public monuments dedicated to historical figures deeply involved with colonialism, slavery, genocide, violence, and/or the suffering of others?
- What are the relations between the past(s) our societies choose to remember and the histories historians choose to write?
- What happens at the boundary between “collective memory” and “professional historiography”?

Prospective authors should submit proposals with titles, 200-300 words abstracts, and contact information up to **September 1st, 2023** for consideration. Submissions will be handled via [ScholarOne](#). Please indicate in the cover letter section that your submission is for this theme issue. Full texts are due **February 1st, 2024**. Further questions can be sent to João Ohara, ohara.jm@gmail.com, with CC to HistoryandTheory@wesleyan.edu.