

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### **The Power of Asymmetry or the Struggle for Truth: Invective Practices in Premodern Europe**

**Prague, 7–9 October 2024**

Organizers:

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We invite researchers from various disciplines to submit proposals for 30-minute papers on the subject of invective practices in medieval and early modern Europe.

When it comes to constituting and maintaining social cohesion, contemporary political discourse usually warns against social polarization and division, while also invoking values such as solidarity and cooperation. From an analytical point of view, however, the roots of human communities are more diverse and contradictory. A group may have come into being by command or consensus, by contract or propaganda, by necessity or kinship, by all at the same time, or in another way altogether. Particularly effective are such concepts that enable a group to recognize and determine itself through some kind of conflict with others. The “we” is thus often constituted in demarcation and in contrast to “the other(s)”.

This mechanism of communication was also decisive in premodern Europe, from the Middle Ages to the early modern period. It can be observed in ever-changing constellations, from the confrontation between orthodox believers and “heretics” to the humanists’ vituperation and the Enlightenment’s contempt towards the common people. The manifold patterns of intercommunitary disparagement will be the focus of the planned conference.

The main purpose and also an important effect of invective communication is to downgrade or devalue the other (“Herabsetzung”). The relationship to “the others” is thus conceived asymmetrically. We draw here on Reinhart Koselleck’s research on “historical-

political semantics of asymmetrical counter-concepts” since the mechanisms of asymmetrization have always been a popular instrument of rhetoric, journalism or propaganda in the depiction of the opponents (Good-Evil, Hellene-Barbarian, Christian-pagan, *clarus-obscurus*, intellectual-ignorant etc.). We aim principally at investigating verbal conflicts that create a space for the emergence of discursive imbalances within a society, through which existing power structures can be weakened or strengthened, or new ones forged. We are particularly interested in the invective turn of conflictual events, meaning the momentum of communicative negotiation, which often proves to be exceedingly nuanced and dynamic. Another fecund area of inquiry is reflexivity: In what manner and to what extent do the opposing parties, as well as the potential audience, reflect on the derogatory mode of argumentation?

Because the concepts of “us” and “them”, as investigated by “Koselleckian” research, are unstable, the problem of establishing, (re)appropriating or modifying truth in discursive conflicts comes to the fore. For example, in societies marked by a (nascent) confessional divide, a relation of individual or collective actors to “truthfulness” serves as fundamental identity-marker, which can be established (among other ways) by rhetorical violence including invectives, curses and other ritual declarations, denigration and all kinds of negative speech acts. Especially in religious polemic, the (“divine”) truth is something that has an effect on and in this world while also staying distant and hierarchically superior. The strategies of asserting truth, driven by consensus and competition, are manifold and their products include not only truths that aspire at general and public validity, but also conspiracy theories and similar asymmetrically structured exclusive phenomena.

**Preliminary questions include but are not limited to the following:**

Were the invectives, the purpose of which was to denigrate the opponent through the asymmetrization, used consciously and purposefully or were they part of a larger discourse (e.g. Anti-Judaism)?

What was the reaction to the use of invective on specific topics (religion, language, education), when “sacrosanct” references are given, when it touches highly placed persons, when specific arenas (e.g., university) are entered, or when specific emotions are activated (e.g., anger, envy, or hatred)?

What rhetorical strategies were used to draw outsiders into invective communication and to instrumentalize them for one’s own cause?

What strategies and mechanisms of the assertion of “truth” were used? What categories can we use to classify these strategies and mechanisms (e.g. Koselleckian counter-concepts)?

In what kind of situations/contexts could the “truth” be established without negative speech acts? Were there any alternative methods of a polemical discourse?

### **Guidelines for submitting a proposal:**

If interested, please send us a proposal with an abstract of 100–300 words. Proposals should additionally include paper title, your name, institutional affiliation (if applicable) and contact information (e-mail address).

They may be submitted in **English** or **German**. The conference will be held in both these languages. The conference contributions can be subsequently submitted for publication in a collective volume.

Travels costs and the accommodation in Prague will be covered by the organizers.

Please send us your paper proposals before **15 March 2024** to one of the addresses below:

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