

Laboratories of the Social: Utopian Settlements and Reform Movements in the Long Nineteenth Century

Workshop held online, January 27-28, 2022. Conveners: Anne Kwaschik (University of Konstanz) and Claudia Roesch (GHI Washington). Participants: Bartłomiej Błesznowski (Institute of Applied Social Science, University of Warsaw); Johannes Bosch (University of Heidelberg); Isabel Heinemann (University of Münster); Ana Keilson (Harvard University); Robert Kramm (Ludwig Maximilians University, München); Anne Kraume (University of Konstanz); Piotr Kuligowski (Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History Polish Academy of Sciences); Michel Lallement (CNAM Paris); Pamela Pilbeam (Royal Holloway, University of London); Julia Ramírez-Blanco (University of Barcelona); Anne-Sophie Reichert (University of Chicago); Stefan Rindlisbacher (University of Fribourg); Andrea Westermann (University of Konstanz); Richard Wetzell (GHI Washington); Alexander van Wickeren (University of Köln).

The term *utopia* is ancient Greek for “no place.” Thomas More first coined the term in 1516 to describe an ideal society governed by new social, religious and economic relations. Modern writers have tended to use the term as an abstract idea that can only later be applied to the real world. Friedrich Engels followed this thought when he described early socialist thinkers Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Henri de Saint-Simon as “drifting off into pure phantasies.” There was a defined separation between so-called scientific and practical socialist knowledge and that of utopian fantasies of the early nineteenth century.

In their workshop, Claudia Roesch and Anne Kwaschik aimed to unsettle Friedrich Engels’ description of “utopian social-

ism” by turning seriously to so-called “utopian” models as experiments of community building and social organization. The two-day workshop investigated intentional settlements with a praxeological approach to the history of knowledge. Asking not whether these nineteenth-century social experiments were utopian or not, presenters instead conceptualized settlements as productive sites of social knowledge and took the embeddedness in contemporary scientific discourse seriously. The organizers suggested viewing these attempts as experiments and testing grounds for imagining a new society. Therefore, the conference approached intentional settlements and life reform projects with a history of knowledge perspective asking how these sites produced knowledge through practices such as observation or experimentation. This approach demonstrated how new forms of social relations, economic and political ideals traveled within and out of these settlements.

Roesch and Kwaschik emphasized that reformist thinkers like Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier provided a new form of knowledge production about native and colonial societies. The workshop utilized the term “laboratories” to examine the space made within these new communities. This is a term that relates to both theory and practice; an arena that refines subjectivity and interacts with political, social, and cultural contexts. For this reason, nineteenth-century reform movements, including the utopian settlements, should be seen as creative and pragmatic sites of social knowledge production.

The first panel, “Early Socialism and Colonialism,” chaired by Isabel Heinemann charted out the knowledge systems and transfers that happened among early nineteenth-century reformers in the unique space offered by the colonies. For those seeking to establish intentional settlements, colonies provided infrastructures and an arena to test out new theories of social organization. Anne Kwaschik’s contribution

provided an interesting discussion on this case. Kwaschik explored laboratory discourses and Fourier-inspired settlements in Algeria during the 1840s and 1850s. She showed how Fourier's associative principle was tested and put into practice in Saint-Denis-Du-Sig. The community, established in 1846, demonstrated a compelling space to examine new knowledge systems set between the colonial environment and utopian thinkers as well as relations between Europeans and Arabs. By looking at Saint-Denis-Du-Sig, the early settler colonialism in Algeria was dependent on experiments in the formation of new social science ideas.

Claudia Roesch followed this discussion with a presentation on a pamphlet written by John A. Etzler, titled *Paradise Within the Reach of All Men*, that highlighted the ways socialist settlements were laboratories of modernity. Etzler, a German-American engineer, dedicated his work to thinking about the intersections of labor and engineering in order to uplift humanity. Etzler's project for technological advancement in the service of overtaking nature was deeply embedded in colonialism. He traveled across communities in the Americas in the hopes of establishing his plans for technological advancement and saw in these arenas a space to implement new forms of labor organization outside of traditional social forces.

Piotr Kuligowski examined the unique space of the colonies for Polish reformers to test out how a new independent Polish nation state could function. Polish elites and intellectuals saw colonial spaces as areas to create ideal settlements based on the models set by Étienne Cabet and Saint-Simon. For Polish reformers and intellectuals such as Jan Czyński, and Ludwik Królikowski, the models set by French utopians provided a way to rethink social formation in Poland. He thus traced a global knowledge transfer and practice that occurred within these communities.

In her comment, Pamela Pilbeam highlighted the connection between Saint-Simonians and the Fourierists in projects in both Poland and in Algeria. In all papers, there was an important aspect of knowledge sharing among utopian thinkers and projects. The colonies provided a space to enact and practice new ideas of social relations and organization. For many of the reformist thinkers, the colonies were seen as an opportunity to test out communal forms of labor relations and housing as alternatives to the boom and bust of early industrialism.

In his keynote lecture titled “Living in Utopia,” Michel Lallement focused on the sociological make up of intentional communes, with the Oneida community in New York State and the Guise *Familistère* in France as case studies. In both, community members took up the issues of marriage, slavery, and labor. Interestingly, however, it seems that existing social differences were not overcome. In many cases, particularly within marriages, new forms of gender imbalances and power structures developed. Lallement further highlighted the differences between French and American communes. In the U.S., communities had diverse origins along political, social, or religious lines. Religious communes, it seems, were able to maintain a longer life than others. In this regard, patterns of colonial settlement seem like a good starting point to examine why certain communes were able to exist longer than others. There is a long tradition of religious communities identifying the United States as an ideal space to create a new society. This tradition provided networks and models for secular communitarians to follow in their footsteps.

The workshop’s second panel, “Naturist Discourses and Alternative Forms of Living,” chaired by Andrea Westermann examined the “return to nature” projects utilized by various reformer groups. The panel moved away from intentional settlements and discussed reform projects that centered on colonial frontiers, the body, and food. Johannes Bosch

focused on the French naturist milieu during the 1920s and 1930s to examine how two very different political views could share communication and knowledge about food and regenerating the body. The conservative doctor Paul Carton and the anarchist group of Bascon both embraced vegetarianism as a form of altering society. Carton used vegetarianism as a way to discipline the body away from the excesses of modern life, elicit pleasure, and other “poisons.” For Carton, vegetarianism was a form of controlling “the passions.” The anarchist group of Bascon defined vegetarianism as a way to combat capitalism and forms of domination. Bosch charted out how Carton and the anarchists were able to share approaches and knowledge even while adhering to different political worldviews.

Alexander van Wickeren similarly saw important knowledge transfers within the Christian vegetarian movement in South Africa, particular the U.S.-based Seventh-Day Adventists. Van Wickeren approached the Seventh-Day Adventists as a space to examine the connection among global knowledge transfers pertaining to food movements and anti-vice advocacy. Traditional studies, van Wickeren stated, had focused on the criticism of meat eating particularly within Western spaces. A look at South Africa, by contrast, shows how the knowledge and discussion of Christian vegetarianism was entangled with the colonial frontier, trans-imperiality, and color line constructions. There is a more widespread transfer that moves beyond the criticism of meat that speaks to ideas of perfection, race, exclusion, and forms of identity.

Stefan Rindlisbacher examined life reform movements during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Rindlisbacher noticed that many of the early reform movements did not seek to destroy capitalism or overthrow the class system, but rather make a more efficient system. Life reform settlements, as well, were defined by their relationship to urban cities. They were accessible by train and visitors would move

between the settlements. The settlements in the colonies, by contrast, were defined by the goal of creating a more efficient civilizing mission that benefited both settler and indigenous communities. Settlers were to learn from indigenous communities about certain forms of cultivation which would then be commercialized and sold to Europe creating new forms of commercialization and exoticization.

In his comment, Robert Kramm pointed to how these discussions sought to “sanitize” communities, particularly the body and sex within imperial spaces. All panelists turned to an idealized form of nature that supposedly had healing powers and capabilities. Activists utilized nature that was entrenched within imperial spaces to contrast with European metropolises. These relationships, however, were multilayered with meaning and various forms of knowledge transfers that moved across political, religious, and social lines.

The last panel, “Arts, Sciences and Experimentation,” chaired by Richard Wetzell investigated experiments in knowledge creation that went beyond the traditional laboratory. Anne-Sophie Reichert explored how reformers turned to dance to alleviate the excesses of modernity. Focusing her discussion on Émile Jaques-Dalcroze and Rudolf Laban, she highlighted how the dance studio was a pedagogical site and laboratory that sought to alter both bodies and society. Her work forces us to unpack what we understand as laboratories and science. Pedagogues and thinkers such as Laban and Jacques-Dalcroze utilized approaches developed by other reformers and applied them to physical movement and dance. Their approach to the social question should not be disqualified.

The work on bodies and lived experiences was echoed again in Bartłomiej Blesznowski’s contribution. He discussed Edward Abramowski’s “experimental metaphysics” as an attempt to cross disciplinary borders between scientific

knowledge and praxis. During the late nineteenth century Abramowski utilized laboratories to examine the construction of modern subjectivity and how a more scientific, efficient form of socialism could be implemented that included an understanding of the workings of the individual. Cooperativism for Abramowski needed to include whole aspects of the individual.

Julia Ramírez-Blanco highlighted the important space of the workshop in attempts to reform the excesses of modernity and industrialization in Victorian Britain. She focused on Charles Robert Ashbee, a disciple of William Morris and John Ruskin of the British Arts and Crafts Movement. Her discussion on Ashbee revealed a complex network of approaches to modernity that included returning to the traditional guild model. This return to the guild was not simply a return to the past. It was entangled with the British movement for the legalization of homosexuality, social democracy, and regenerating social and economic relations under new forms of friendship and community.

Ana Keilson's comment pointed to two themes occurring throughout the discussion: the generative and creative against the unchangeable. These laboratories were both specific spaces but also embodied in the actions and movements of people and communities. In one way, the laboratory was internalized as a reflective space. Through these three papers we saw creative impulses and analyses of new forms of knowledge that focused on notions of friendship, the urge to create new subjectivities, and emotions. This points to the need to move beyond the traditional analysis of utopia and the social question to include new forms of bonds, guilds, and the dance studio.

The workshop thoroughly highlighted the various forms of knowledge production that spread beyond the intentional settlement. Reformers engaged with existing institutions, the

state, as well as imperial spaces. Settlement projects therefore must be seen as both attempts to solve current social questions and ideas deeply imbedded in the political and cultural contexts. The workshop concluded with some important points on new approaches to take when studying intentional settlements. Two major themes emerged throughout the discussion. First, the entanglements between the knowledge discussions formed in intentional settlements and colonialism. Social reformers saw opportunities in the colonies that equally worked towards spreading some form of civilizing mission. This indirectly benefited state and colonial officials who gained new knowledge about local societies and environments. Second, the need to expand our understanding of the spread of alternative forms of knowledge production. The dance studio, experimental metaphysics, and the guild for example were entangled sites that combined various approaches to not only create a new society but a new humanity. Experimental forms of co-habitation, though utopian in their outlook, in the end provided the opposite of utopias – practical attempts of bringing the new world order to life. Life reform and settlement experiments therefore must be approached as having powerful legacies that informed approaches to thinking about the organization of society, technology and the shaping of the colonial world since the early nineteenth century.

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