

Harmonizing Utopia and the State

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This panel considers historical examples of non-state approaches to utopia in the context of a dystopian society and state. Each of these papers examines a different aspect of nineteenth century critiques of the status quo and proposed solutions. Jonathan Baldwin presents “Peter Kropotkin: The Plague of the State and the Salvation of Humanity”: Peter Kropotkin’s (1842-1921) political thought was expressed through a diverse range of writing, from criminological treatises to utopian projections. He understood society and politics through a modern infusion of anarchism and science, with which he would both diagnose humankind’s illnesses and prescribe the remedial treatments for its cure. The aim of this paper is to consider Kropotkin’s understanding of the misery and ruin suffered by humankind at the hands of the State in the context of warfare, crime, and immorality, and how he conceived an anarchist society would eradicate such existential threats.

Matthew Wilson shifts the discussion from the theoretical to a practical application of utopian philosophy in Victorian Britain. Matthew will present “The Utopian Mission of Richard Congreve”: From the 1850s the Oxford don and ex-Anglican minister, Richard Congreve (1818-1899) united his former students with the intention to realise the utopia called The Occidental Republic, which was the vision of the French philosopher, Auguste Comte. With the aim to facilitate the devolution of Western empires into idyllic self-governing city-state system, Congreve coordinated Positivist institutions at home and abroad to form the cultural and economic foundations for all to live ‘the good life’. This essay as such situates Congreve as one the first Victorians to seek to harmonise international and urban-regional affairs as the basis of ethical community-making.

Lastly, Cheryl Coulthard’s paper brings the United States into the discussion. “Harmony Under Fire: Harmony Society, Pacifism and the American Civil War”: The utopian search for harmony is often conceived of as an inward focus on creating a better life in community for members, however utopia also entails harmonious interactions with the rest of society and the state. The aptly named Harmony Society enduring for a century marking it as one of the great successes of nineteenth century American utopian communalism. This essay examines the ways in which Harmony Society sought to reconcile its pacifist and isolationist beliefs with the demands of the American State during the Civil War.

This panel intends to broaden consideration of historical critiques of dystopian society and state and utopian possibilities for greater harmony.