

Utopian Engineering: Solving the 19th century Slavery, Labor, and the Women's Questions with Science

My ongoing book project *Utopian Engineering* (a Habilitation project in the German system) investigates the role of engineering and natural sciences in 19th century settlement projects in the Americas. The underlying hypothesis posits that dissident religious and early socialist reformers applied methods derived from mechanics and engineering to solve the great questions of the long 19th century – namely the slavery question, the women's question, and the labor question.¹

My analysis aligns with the argument made by Holly Case that the 19th century was the “age of questions,” where major social questions were debated in an international public sphere and reformers experimented with mathematical solutions to the great problems of the age.² Archive findings and my research in early socialist newspapers indicate that especially the slavery question, the labor question and the women's question were intricately intertwined in the minds of the 19th century social reformers. Early socialist thinkers, describing marriage or factory work as forms of slavery, identified a connection between the three institutions in a) the lack of property rights of married women, enslaved plantation workers in the Caribbeans and factory workers in the UK, b) the mental state of unfreedom, c) their lack of political representation, d) material poverty.

This type of thinking, I argue was not confined to early socialists, it connected religious dissenters, emigree engineers, and abolitionists in their pursuit of a new social order rooted in rationality and science. These reformers were capable of envisioning a future radically different from their past and present and that was supposed to be brought about through science and mechanics.³ I understand utopian engineering as the ability to envision a radically different future and the will to bring about social change with means of science and engineering. In a novel approach to 19th-century intellectual history, I employ utopian engineering as a lens to explore the intellectual entanglements of 19th century social reform with gender and family history in connection with the history of knowledge, the history of capitalism, and utopian studies.

¹ See Hannah Ahlheim, *Ex Machina. Die Gestaltung der Utopie in der Arbeitswelt des britischen Frühsozialisten Robert Owen*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 311 (2020): 37-69, here 44.

² Holly Case, *The Age of Questions*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2018, 43.

³ Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 17.