

# The Century of Sputnik and Chernobyl: Science and the European Left during the Twentieth Century

*Sputniks och Tjernobyls århundrade: vetenskapen och de europeiska vänsterpartierna under 1900-talet*

We live in a society where traditional progressive parties and trust in scientific experts alike are in crisis. To understand the present, we need a historical perspective. Traditionally, left-wing ideals have been dependent on science in an instrumental way — as science increased the power of the state to shape society and nature — and a substantial way — as science underpinned an optimistic vision of rationality and progress. The labour movement especially embodied the ideas of High Modernism and nineteenth-century Positivism. Without science, it would have been impossible to build the society of tomorrow.

As the century progressed, left-wing forces put these ideals into practice in the radical social engineering of the Soviet Union, the gradualist transformation of social democracy and the nation-building of decolonised peoples. At the same time, two world wars, Nazism and atomic warfare revealed the darker side of technology. Consumer society and the Space Race testified the success of expanding scientific research and applying it for defence and civilian purposes. However, success bred doubts: growing awareness of technological threats to health and the environment; concern about the dehumanising effects of technological society; worry about technocracy undermining democratic scrutiny; taxpayers' protest against "wasting" taxpayers' money on useless scientific projects.

The 1970s were a turning point. As Western society moved away from positivism, traditional left-wing parties found it more difficult to build a cohesive and attractive political offer, but new forms of democratic engagement and political mobilisation emerged: new social movements, women's rights activism, green parties, citizens' advocacy groups. As science became a more complicated issue, so did its political ramifications.

The conference is organised by the Centre for European Research of the University of Gothenburg (CERGU) and sponsored by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (F19-1548). The goal of the conference is to explore the reciprocal influences between science and the European left, with the hypothesis that the historical development of one can be explained by the other. While the two topics have been explored separately, we argue that showing the connections between the two can provide new explanatory tools to history and social science. The conference brings together established scholars and early-career researchers alike from different disciplines and nations.

The conference was originally scheduled for April 2020, but it had to be postponed due to Covid-19. Despite this temporary obstacle, the event is more urgent than ever. Indeed, the global pandemic revealed how science influences politics and what role scientific expertise play in a democracy.

Following Benedetto Croce's maxim that "All history is contemporary history", we will have a free discussion at the end of the first day to discuss how the experience of Covid-19 changed the perception of the interaction of scientific expertise, scientific issues and democratic politics and what insights we can apply to the study of the past.

**How to participate:** to attend the conference, view the speeches and ask questions, visit the CERGU website, Facebook page or write to the conference organisers:

<https://www.gu.se/en/european-research/events>

Ettore Costa: [ettore.costa@lir.gu.se](mailto:ettore.costa@lir.gu.se)

Angelica Sohlberg: [angie.sohlberg@gu.se](mailto:angie.sohlberg@gu.se)

Birgitta Jännebring: [birgitta.jannebring@cergu.gu.se](mailto:birgitta.jannebring@cergu.gu.se)

## Programme

*Tuesday 20 April 2021*

8:30-9:00: Introduction

9:00-10:30: Panel 1: From Lenin to Gagarin: Communist imagination of science

D. Steila, "Science and Revolution in Russian Marxism (1900-1920)"

G. Bassi, "The Italian Communist Discourse on Soviet Scientific Propaganda (1949-1969)"

M. Schwartz, "The limits of communism. Imaginations of progress and society in Soviet science fiction of the post-Stalin period"

10:30-12:00 Panel 2: Predicting the Future, Mastering the Future

G. O'Hara, "Imagining the Planned future: the British Government's Very Long Term Planning Committee in the 1960s"

E. Rindzeviciute, "The science of forecasting and prediction in the Soviet Union"

12:00-13:15: Lunch pause, mingling in Zoom

13:30-15:00: Panel 3: Scientific Progress and Human Progress

A. Chakraborty, "Nehru's Science and 'Scientific Temper': Tracing the Optimism of Socialist Science Backwards"

S. Salvia, "In the Name of Galileo: Scientific Progress, Social Emancipation, Political Struggle, and Cultural Hegemony in the Italian Marxist Left (1957-1968)"

J. Gärdebo, "Tracing sociotechnical imaginaries of Swedish satellite remote sensing, 1973–1986"

15:00-15:30: Coffee pause, mingling on Zoom

15:30-17:00: Roundtable: "Can Covid-19 help us reread the past of science and politics?"

*Wednesday 21 April 2021*

9:00-10:30: Panel 4: Scientists as Political Actors and Policy-Makers

E. Costa, "The Bee and the Architect: Scientists against Scientism in Italy, Britain and West Germany (1977-1988)"

M. Emanuel, "Science Diplomacy, Technology Transfer, and Cold War Neutrality: Swedish Collaboration in Astrophysics with the USSR, 1965–1976"

P. Lundin, "Science and Social Democracy: Court Politics in the Shadow of the Cold War"

10:30-12:00: Panel 5: Science and New Politics

S. Topçu, "From resistance to co-management? A social history of contestations over the French nuclear complex (from 1970s to present)"

J. Scholz, B. Kolboske, "At the Intersection of Biopolitics, (Male) Legal Expertise and Women's Liberation Movement: The West German Abortion Debate and Subsequent Criminal Law Reform in the 1970s & 1980s".

12:00-13:15: Lunch pause, mingling in Zoom

13:30-15:00: Panel 6: From the Society of Tomorrow to the Society of Risks

K. Ekberg, "'A question of scale? - climate change science, nuclear power and the Social Democrats in Sweden 1970-1980'"

C. Götter, "Fissionable Fears – Fearful Perspectives on the History of Nuclear Power"

C. Laucht, "The 'New Urban Left' and Anti-Nuclear Politics in Britain, 1980-85"

15:30-16:30: Discussion on conference findings and publication strategy

**Giulia Bassi** is Research Fellow in Contemporary History at the University of Piemonte Orientale and Adjunct Professor at University of Parma. Her research focuses on the history of political thought and twentieth century historiography, especially European and Italian Marxist and Communist tradition. She is the editor of *Words of Power, the Power of Words. The Twentieth-Century Communist Discourse in International Perspective* (2019).

**Anwasha Chakraborty** is a Postdoc Researcher at the University of Bologna. She has carried out research in the field in India and Europe, exploring themes of STS, heritage studies, museum management, science communication and social innovation.

**Ettore Costa** is a Postdoc Researcher at the CERGU. He previously researched socialist internationalism. His current research is on the relationship between science and Western European social democrats and communists from 1957 to 1986.

**Kristoffer Ekberg** is a post-doctoral researcher at Chalmers University of Technology. His research interests include environmental history, cultural history, utopia and, social movements. His current project is on climate change knowledge and denial in Swedish politics and industry during the period 1970-2000.

**Martin Emanuel** is a historian of science and technology and currently a researcher at the Dept. of Urban Planning and Environment, KTH Royal Institute of Technology. Next to his speciality in mobility history, since a few years he is developing a new research orientation devoted to Swedish-Soviet science collaboration.

**Johan Gärdebo** is a researcher in history of science, technology, and environment at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology. In his monograph dissertation *Environing Technology* (2019), Gärdebo detail how the state-owned Swedish Space Corporation from mid-twentieth century onwards established an infrastructure for satellite data and promoted the technology as a tool for sustainable development of the environment and promote Swedish foreign policy.

**Christian Götter** is Research Associate at the Forschungsinstitut für Wissenschafts- und Technikgeschichte at the Deutsches Museum, Munich. His primary research-interest is a cultural history of conflicts and communication. He is working on a post-doc-project funded by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research, examining the perception of nuclear energy and corresponding societal conflicts and debates in Germany and the United Kingdom.

**Birgit Kolboske** joined the Research Program "History of the Max Planck Society (1948–2002)" in 2011, where she currently writes her dissertation on the gender specific hierarchies in the Max Planck Society. Her expertise includes gender issues in science organizations and feminist perspectives on epistemology and history of science; the National Socialist era and the Holocaust, in particular the role of interpreters in the military tribunals after World War II, from the Nuremberg trials to the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials.

**Christoph Laucht** is Senior Lecturer at the Swansea University, researching social and cultural history of Western Europe and the United States after 1945. His interests lie in historical peace and conflict research; the Cold War; British-German relations; as well as film, television and history. He is the author of *Elemental Germans: Klaus Fuchs, Rudolf Peierls and the Making of British Nuclear Culture, 1939-59* (2012).

**Per Lundin** is professor of History of technology and Head of the Division of Science, Technology and Society at the Chalmers University of Technology. Currently, he researches the role of military research institutes as knowledge producers in Cold War Sweden.

**Glen O'Hara** is Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at Oxford Brookes University. He is the author of a series of books and articles on modern Britain, most recently *The Politics of Water in Post-War Britain* (2017). He is a prolific commentator on current affairs in Britain, publishing this year and last in Foreign Policy, The Guardian and The New European.

**Egle Rindzeviciute** is Professor of Criminology and Sociology at the Kingston University London. Her research interests cover sociology of scientific expertise, public policy and culture. Her current research project is on nuclear heritage in Russia and the UK. Her latest book is *The Power of Systems: How Policy Sciences Opened Up the Cold War World* (2016)

**Stefano Salvia** is Research Assistant in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Pisa, collaborator at the Galileo Museum of history of Science, Florence and visiting scholar at the Centre for History of Science, Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. His research

interests range from early modern science to contemporary HPST, from science teaching and communication to STS-oriented theoretical and applied museology

**Juliane Scholz** is a Research Scholar at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. Her overall research concentrates on modern and contemporary German, East-Central European and US-American social, cultural and intellectual history. Her expertise includes exile of creative and scientific professionals, history of the LGBTIQ-movement as well as film and media history in comparative and transnational perspectives

**Matthias Schwartz** is a Research Fellow at the Leibniz Centre for Literary and Cultural Research, Berlin. His research interests include the cultural history of Russian and Soviet adventure literature, science fiction and popular sciences; Eastern European youth cultures. He is researching Contemporary Eastern European Literatures and is the author of *Expeditionen in andere Welten: sowjetische Abenteuerliteratur und Science-Fiction von der Oktoberrevolution bis zum Ende der Stalinzeit* (2014).

**Daniela Steila** is Professor of History of Philosophy at the University of Turin. She has researched and taught Russian culture and Russian philosophy in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Russian reception of empirio-criticism, Russian philosophical historiography, the thought of L.S. Vygotskij. She is the author of *Scienza e rivoluzione: la recezione dell'empiriocriticismo nella cultura russa (1877-1910)* (1996).

**Sezin Topçu** is Senior Researcher at the French National Research Centre (CNRS), Senior Lecturer at the Paris School of Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (Ehess) and Member of the Centre for the Study of Social Movements (CEMS-Ehess). She has researched sociology of science and medicine, specializing on technological risk, exceptionalism and public criticism within environmental and reproductive health fields. Her current research is the medicalization/pharmaceuticalization of the female body in France and in Turkey. She is the author of *La France nucléaire. L'art de gouverner une technologie contestée* (2013).

## Themes and Questions

Exploring the connection between the European left and science opens up a wide range of queries, centred around the following topics:

Science and the Society of Tomorrow: the conference explores the role of science in the imagination of the future by the European left, how it shaped its political programme, rhetoric and culture. It also explores how sociotechnical imaginaries evolved in response to political developments. Particular emphasis is given to the two main branches of the European left in the twentieth century — social democracy and communism —, but the influence of European concepts in decolonised countries will also be covered.

Scientists as policy-makers and political actors: Political and intellectual history usually ignore natural scientists as public intellectuals — unlike artists and literary figures — but recent historiography has shown how they influenced politics and policies acting as advisors, opinion-makers or activists. Focus is given to how expertise was used in policy-formation, legislation, debates — as the twentieth century saw declining trust in experts and growing demand for democratic accountability and citizens' participation.

Science and the new politics: In Ulrich Beck's Risk Society, the goal of politics is no longer achieving positive goals, but preventing the worst, since the future was not a blank slate to be shaped, but a source of threats — including technological threats. The conference explores how technological risks became more politically salient across the century, undermining the old left — more concerned with the activist state — and creating new openings for political mobilisation and democratic engagement. This allowed the emergence of a new politics from below and new political actors concerned with health and the environment.