



Seminar

CHRISTOPHER MECKSTROTH

Pro Futura Scientia Fellow, SCAS.

Senior Lecturer on the History of Political Thought, University of Cambridge

Pax Universalis et Perpetua: Empire, Anarchy, and the Invention of International Order, c. 1500-2000

Tuesday, 16 March 2021, 2:15 p.m.

Due to the precautions imposed by the current Corona pandemic, the Thunberg Hall will be closed to the public until further notice.

You are therefore invited to join the seminar via Zoom instead:

<https://uu-se.zoom.us/j/69105109042>

S W E D I S H
COLLEGIUM
for ADVANCED STUDY

www.swedishcollegium.se

ABOUT CHRISTOPHER MECKSTROTH

Chris Meckstroth studied history, philosophy, and political theory at Harvard University before taking his PhD in Political Science from the University of Chicago in 2010. His PhD was supported by the Mellon Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies, and he spent a year on exchange at Sciences Po Paris, while conducting research at the Bibliothèque Nationale. After receiving his degree, he returned to Harvard, where he lectured for three years in the programme on Social Studies. In 2013, he took up a post as Lecturer on the History of Political Thought in the History Faculty, University of Cambridge, and was made Senior Lecturer in 2017.

Meckstroth's work has combined the history of democracy and democratic thought with a particular focus on nineteenth-century German and French political philosophy, as they developed alongside reflection on the new types of popular politics unleashed by the French Revolution. His first monograph, *The Struggle for Democracy: Paradoxes of Progress and the Politics of Change*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2015. His articles have appeared in journals including *Constellations*; *Political Theory*; and *The American Political Science Review*. He is co-editor, with Samuel Moyn, of the third volume of *The Cambridge History of Democracy*, which covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is currently under contract with Cambridge University Press.

As a Pro Futura Fellow, Meckstroth will be working on a project on 'The Invention of International Order: A History and Theory of General Peace Treaties, c. 1500-1914,' which examines several centuries in the uneven development of a distinctively modern kind of federal approach to establishing order out of anarchy and the ruins of war.

ABSTRACT

On the traditional account, the history of international relations is one of the transition, symbolised by the 1648 treaties of Westphalia, from a premodern world of imperial and feudal powers to one of independent sovereign states in a condition of global anarchy. This story is wrong, and not only because the period from 1492 to the second half of the twentieth century coincided with the rise of many of the most extensive empires in human history. In fact, international anarchy was a condition into which Europe was plunged in the course of the sixteenth-century wars of religion, well before the rise to prominence of modern 'states'. Westphalia was indeed a turning point, but what was invented there was not an order of sovereign states, but a new mechanism for bringing an end to the general wars that had ravaged Europe for nearly a century. This mechanism was the congress of all belligerent powers and the multilateral treaties establishing a legal order for peace that issued from it. What was put in the place of the old 'universal' Roman Empire in 1648 was not an anarchic world of states, but a federal legal order underpinned by mutual recognition and agreement among a diverse range of powers from cities to principalities, kingdoms and republics to empires. Although this new solution did not end all wars, it provided a clear and workable model for bringing future conflicts to a close, and it succeeded decisively in ending the century of general anarchy preceding. Over the next five centuries, this great modern invention – the federal solution to international order – would repeatedly break down, under the pressures of renewed attempts to establish universal monarchy by figures from Louis XIV and Napoleon to Hitler. But each and every time, once those challenges were defeated, it was explicitly a new adaptation of the federal model pioneered at Westphalia that would be put in place to secure the peace. Over time, participation in this model expanded from the European continent to include first Britain, then the Russian and Ottoman Empires, and eventually, in the twentieth century, powers from every corner of the globe. What is the logic that made this federal solution work? Why did it repeatedly break down? And how, in the wake of those breakdowns, did congress participants manage to adapt the general solution to overcome new threats to global peace? These are the sort of questions to which answers may be gleaned from the now four-and-a-half-century history of the system of comprehensive peace congresses – in its complex overlap with empire and its danger always of collapsing back into anarchy – which ought to be seen as defining both the modern approach to international order and the precondition of any meaningful notion of international law.