

Call for Half-Open Panel – Theoriekongress Passau 2026

Organizers:

Dr. Thomas Telios (Philosophy, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of St. Gallen)

Dr. Simon Pistor (History, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of St. Gallen)

Title:

The Necessity for a Utopian Turn in Democratic Theory, Philosophy, and Practice.

Abstract:

In recent years and decades, utopian studies have experienced an unexpected renaissance. Two camps have emerged within this field:

The theories of the first camp (continue to) argue that utopias have a negative political effect (Allen 2015, Leopold 2016, Azmanova 2020, Jonas 2020, Warren 2021), if they have not become superfluous or even impossible (Kumar 2005). The reasons are manifold: In a nutshell, utopian depictions deflect from radical social criticism by outlining only a partially better future world that they propagate as inevitable (Adorno 1969). Further, utopias often culminate in a defeatist and resigned reverie about future social formations (Derrida 2006). Finally, utopian ideas tend to fall into one-dimensional generalizations, thus failing to keep in mind and address the concrete interconnectedness of various forms of discrimination (Kreisky 2000).

Contrarily, the theories of the second camp argue for the transformability of utopias (Habermas 1985) and their politically beneficial character regarding democratic (Kompridis 2015), ecological (Thaler 2022), anti-racial (Zamalin 2019, Paris 2025) and anti-colonial struggles (Sarr 2019) affirming thus the necessary character of utopias (Gorz 1999, Seel 2001, Abensour 2008, Negt 2012) as holistic, inclusive and performative projects (Telios 2025) even independently of their outcome (Bloch 1977). The reasons for that are also manifold: *In nuce*, utopias are constitutive in unleashing the radically imaginary allowing us to think of a different future (Laclau/Mouffe 2005). Forward-looking visions such as utopias guarantee that democracies do not fall victim to entropic tendencies, which would inevitably cause them to revert to earlier stages of development (Comte 1853). Finally, the existence of utopias and alternative visions of the future prevents ideologies considered obsolete from being revived and projected into the future again, a tendency that Zygmunt Bauman (2017) has codified as “retrotopia”.

Building on Miguel Abensour’s historical diagnosis that democracy and utopia are mutually depending on each other since (cf. Abensour 2008: 417) and following Silvia Federici’s appeal that the world needs

to be “re-encharmed” (Federici 2019), the panel suggests that – if they are to overcome political apathy and act as a bulwark against totalitarian polarizations and the rise of neo-authoritarian and massifying tendencies – our current democracies need to be *re-utopianized*.

To this end, we are looking for contributions which gauge the relationship between democracy and utopia, reimagine how utopian thought fosters democratic potentiality, or which question the usefulness of utopia for democracy. Contributions may reply to the following *non-exhaustive* questions:

- What role does imagination play in utopian thought and how does political and social imagination influence democratic proposals?
- Are there historical instances in which historically utopian proposals were achieved in subsequent democratic struggles?
- Which promises does utopian thought have today for democracy in peril? Is utopia a democratic flight forward?
- What promises and theoretical potential lie in the temporal structure of utopia for democratic theorizing today?

Bibliography:

Abensour, Miguel: “Persistent Utopia.” *Constellations*, 15.3 (2008): 406-421.

Adorno, Theodor W.: *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1969.

Allen, Amy: “Emancipation without Utopia: Subjection, Modernity, and the Normative Claims of Feminist Critical Theory.” *Hypatia*, 30.3 (2015): 513-529.

Azmanova, Alben: *Capitalism on Edge. How Fighting Precarity Can Achieve Radical Change Without Crisis or Utopia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

Bauman, Zygmunt: *Retrotopia*. Cambridge: Polity, 2017.

Bloch, Ernst: „Kann Hoffnung enttäuscht werden?“ In ders.: *Gesamtausgabe Bd. 9. Literarische Aufsätze*, 385-391. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977.

Comte, August: *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*. London: Chapman, 1853.

Derrida, Jacques: *Maschinen Papier. Das Schreibmaschinenband und andere Antworten*. Wien: Passagen, 2006.

Federici, Silvia: *Re-enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019.

Gorz, Andre: *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

Habermas, Jürgen: „Die Krise des Wohlfahrtsstaates und die Erschöpfung utopischer Energien.“ In ders.: *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit: Kleine Politische Schriften V*, 141-166. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985.

Jonas, Hans: *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020.

- Kompridis, Nikolas: "Founding Political Critique in a Post-Political World: Towards a Renewal of Utopian Energies." In *Reclaiming Democracy. Judgment, Responsibility, and the Right to Politics*, hrsg. v. Albenaz Azmanova und Mihaela Mihai, 184-201. London: Routledge, 2015.
- Kreisky, Eva: „Die Phantasie ist nicht an der Macht...“. Vom Verschleiß des Utopischen im 20. Jahrhundert.“ *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 29.1 (2000): 7-28.
- Kumar, Krishan: *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005.
- Laclau, Ernesto und Chantal Mouffe: *Hegemonie und radikale Demokratie. Zur Dekonstruktion des Marxismus*. Wien: Passagen, 2005.
- Leopold, David: "On Marxian Utopophobia." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 54.1 (2016): 111-134.
- Negt, Oskar: *Nur noch Utopien sind realistisch. Politische Interventionen*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2012.
- Paris, William M.: *Race, Time, and Utopia. Critical Theory and the Process of Emancipation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025.
- Sarr, Felwine: *Afrotopia*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2019.
- Seel, Martin: „Drei Regeln für Utopisten“. *Merkur*, 55.629-630 (2001): 747-755.
- Telios, Thomas: "On Koinotopia: Reconstructing Utopia at the Era of Neo-Liberalism, Political Ecology, and Intersectionality." In *Utopia and Ecotone: Contemporary Stakes*, hrsg. v. Justine Feyereisen, 73-108. Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2025.
- Thaler, Matthias: *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.
- Warren, Calvin L.: "Abandoning Time: Black Nihilism and the Democratic Imagination." *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 66.1 (2021): 247-251.
- Zamalin, Alex: *Black Utopia. The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.