

Call for Half-Open Panel – Theoriekongress Passau 2026

Organizers:

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Title:

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

Abstract:

Over the last years utopian research seems to be experiencing an unprecedented renaissance. Two camps seem to be emerging:

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”.

This semi-open panel builds on these two trends and measures the promises and perils of utopia for democracy. 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-enchanted” (Federici 2019), the panel is impelled by following assumption: if

democracies are to overcome political apathy and act as a bulwark against totalitarian polarizations and the rise of neo-authoritarian and massifying tendencies then they need to be *re-utopianized*.

To this end, the panel seeks for contributions which gauge the relationship between democracy and utopia, suggest solutions that counter the negative parameters of utopias, and reimagine how utopian thought fosters democratic potentiality. 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?

Formalities:

Abstract submission: second.congress@uni-passau.de. Please, mention the panel in the subject line.

Deadline for Abstracts (max. 500 words + short bio-note): Dec 15, 2025.

Announcement of the results: January 2026.

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