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Venturing beyond Koselleck’s *Erwartungshorizont*: on the category of the utopian

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**ABSTRACT**

For a long time, the reception of German historian and theorist Reinhart Koselleck’s work focused on disciplinary and methodological aspects of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*). However, in recent years, there has been an increased interest in Koselleck’s more theoretical discussions on historical time and temporality, highlighting his oeuvre of a theory of the conditions for possible histories (*Historik*). Taking its cue from the current trend, this article revisits the Koselleckian category of horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*) in light of Ernst Bloch’s work on the principle of hope (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*) and the concept of utopia as the forward dreaming of the Not-Yet (*Noch-Nicht*). By exploring and developing the utopian as a formal category – used as a supplement to Koselleck’s conceptualization of the relationship between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation – the article argues that Koselleck’s theory can be reframed into one that can fully account for the utopian imaginaries of political thinking.

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**Introduction**

Humans have always dreamt of a better life than the one presented to them. In 1516, Thomas More coined the concept of utopia, a combination of the Greek terms *eutopia* (no place) and *eutopia* (good place). In other words, the good place which cannot be found on any map (Sargent 2005; Winter 2006, 2). During the sixteenth century, the earth was relatively unexplored, and it was, at least in theory, possible to imagine an earthly utopia. Hence, early instances of utopia were primarily spatial. However, during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when explorers mapped the earth, the spatial possibilities for a utopia were surpassed by experience. When a utopia could not be discovered or established on the present-day earth, it was shifted into the future; utopia turned into *uchronia*, a product
of which the controllable ground of the present was abandoned (Koselleck 2002, 84–99).

Since More, a plethora of literary utopias have been conjured up alongside numerous dystopias. However, within politics, the notion of utopia has remained undeveloped. When far-reaching visions are applied, political discussions about the future tend to revolve around the long-termism of ideologies. In political debates, the concept of utopia has been given a rather derogative meaning, referring to dreams of a future society that seems impossible to achieve. This has also largely been the case in research, where the focus rarely lies on the utopian aspects of political debates, actions or motives. Instead, researchers tend to explain the actions of political actors with references to an ideology that is often predetermined in both form and content (see also Freeden 1996, 2005). However, this article suggests that there is a need to take utopian visions seriously; they are not merely literary fictions, but also political imaginaries that provide guidance and direction for concrete political actions.

While neither utopias nor dystopias are set in the present, they can be understood as critiques of the present. Utopian expressions in the form of hopes, dreams and wishes point to something that is non-existent. In contrast to utopia, the utopian can – in the words of Ernst Bloch (1988, 5) – be described as ‘an invariant of the direction . . . [of] longing, completely without consideration at all for the content’. Hence, there is no single, fixable utopian content. The historical category of the utopian constitutes a radical act of disjunction; of imagining something completely different than what is the case, while simultaneously highlighting what actually is the case. Fredric Jameson (2004) has argued that utopian images of the future play ‘a diagnostic’ on our present, and Paul Ricoeur (1986, 17) has stated that ‘from this “no place” an exterior glance is cast on our own reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now often beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living’. In other words, the utopian does not only refer to something different within the limitations of the present; it also transcends the current order as a glance into what might be possible outside these boundaries.

The purpose of this article is to explore and develop the utopian as a formal category used to negotiate the relationship between visions of the future and different modes of temporality. Taking its cue from Reinhart Koselleck’s theory of historical time – in particular his conceptualization of the relationship between the space of experience and the
horizon of expectation – the article sets out to reframe Koselleck’s theory, taking inspiration from Ernst Bloch’s notion of utopia as the forward dream of the Not-Yet. The article argues that Koselleck’s conceptualization of the horizon limits visions of the future to the possibilities and opportunities of the present in a way that excludes political imaginaries, while his concept of expectation bundles together visions of the future that could be kept apart analytically. By integrating Koselleck’s work with Bloch’s philosophy, the article shows how it is possible to distinguish between present futures that are restricted by present limitations and future presents that are outside of these restrictions. The article states that hopes and dreams transcend Koselleck’s horizontal line and that the category of the utopian is constituted by a temporal mode of thinking that moves beyond our field of perception. This distinction makes it possible to fully account for utopian imaginaries that are an inherent part of political thinking.

**The temporal horizons of politics**

The relationship between past, present and future is particularly highlighted within politics, since politics can be understood as a temporal activity in which the present is managed, and the future is shaped. While the underlying rationale of politics may be ‘a quest for finality’ (Freeden 2013, 22), the temporality of politics is a negative finality as politics is oriented toward change; it is – as Kari Palonen (2003, 172) suggests – an activity of ‘getting rid of that which is’. Palonen’s (1993, 2003, 2014) discussion on how politicization – the possibilities of making something political, hence creating new horizons for political possibilities – is done through performative acts (politicking) shows that politicization marks a novelty against sedimented practices. Thus, every politicization disrupts continuity by marking a new moment that opens up a new horizon of possibilities. Here, language plays an important role because it constitutes the performative form through which political actors set horizons, for instance, by describing scenarios for the future as more or less probable. As Frank Ankersmit (2002, 117) states, ‘the politician must possess the aesthetic talent of being able to represent political reality in new and original ways’. What constitutes the present possible is thus a matter of political bargaining, which means that the horizons of politics are continuously negotiated and redefined.

The horizontal extensions of politics stretch not only into the future, but also backward into the past. Take the slogan of the 2016 Trump presidential campaign as an example: ‘Make America great again!’ is both the whisper of
a bygone era, however mythologized it may be, and a model for a horizon of renewal, however vaguely conceptualized. Yet, this said, in political debate the future usually dominates the horizon where political actors use horizons to demarcate between the possible and the impossible. Here, the utopian constitutes an ineliminable part as it points to the ‘modal condition of politics in general’ (Osborne 2006, 37).

**Ideology, utopia, and the utopian**

Undoubtedly, the best-known discussion of the relationship between ideology and utopia can be found in Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*. According to Mannheim (2009, 173–179), ideology and utopia are two types of *reality-transcendence* as they are *incongruent* with social reality. The difference between the categories lies in their mode of incongruence; ideologies are antiquated modes of belief, and thus products of a surpassed reality, whilst utopias are in advance of the present reality. In other words, ideologies are transcendent by their orientation toward the past, and utopias are transcendent by their orientation toward the future. In time, each new utopian creation will be challenged by a newer vision, thus rendering the former utopia antiquated, that is, ideological (Geoghegan 2004).

In a similar vein to Mannheim, Paul Ricoeur has argued that utopias are the way that ideologies are challenged. To Ricoeur (1986, 269–284), ideology structures and legitimates the current order by integrating the individual, thereby giving him or her identity. Utopias challenge the stability of this identity by referring to possibilities of something different. Hence, the role of ideology is to support and reproduce the current order, whilst the role of utopia is to subvert that order. The ideological should thus not merely be understood as a distortion of reality, or a veil that hides reality, but rather as a form for social practice, which is necessary in the reproduction and structuration of the current order.

While the ideological is primarily focused on the present – an ideology tells us what the world is today, rather than what it might become – the utopian is concerned with a future temporality, with hopes and dreams of something that is not-yet. In the words of Fredric Jameson (2004, 46), ‘utopianism involves a certain distance from the political institutions which encourages an endless play of fantasy around their possible reconstructions and restructurations’, or as Ernst Bloch (1995, 4, 5) stated in his aim to cut out all forms of thinking that confine the explorations of human possibilities: ‘Thinking means venturing beyond’.
The spatial-temporal concept of horizon and the category of expectation

In everyday language, the concept of horizon never loses its physicality as it constitutes the line beyond which we cannot see; we can observe the horizon but never what lies beyond, regardless of our point of observation. We can never reach the horizon, as it continuously moves away when we approach it. In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1999, 302): ‘Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of “horizon”. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point’. Gadamer’s horizon does not, however, constitute an insurmountable limit, as he stated that the horizon is ‘something into which we move and that moves with us’ (304). In other words, horizons function as limits at a particular time or place, but they simultaneously constitute gateways to something beyond (Vessey 2009; Pickering 2010). Throughout his work on the metahistorical conditions for possible histories (Historik), the Gadamerian notions of horizon, experience and expectation are applied in Koselleck’s analytical framework, and they constitute important theoretical contributions to his understanding of the Being as well as human cognitions and conceptualizations of time. Moreover, Koselleck’s work was also influenced by phenomenological philosophy, in particular the writings of Martin Heidegger (Olsen 2012, 225).

Despite being an admittedly hasty tour through difficult territory, some important features of the history of the horizon metaphor need to be accounted for. According to Edmund Husserl – who introduced the metaphor of the horizon in relation to human experiences of temporality – the horizon denotes a field of perception; and in reference to time-consciousness, the horizon refers to the temporal extensions that are formed by perceptions of the present. The horizon is thus an extension from the present as well as a stretched present (Ewing 2018; see also Geniusas 2012). In its phenomenological version, the horizon is not a border as it was to Kant, instead containing ‘an essential indefiniteness, corresponding to the movement of determination’ (Osborne 2017, 202). The subject is thus placed within the field of a moving limit. While Husserl’s horizon always extended outward from the present, Heidegger’s (1982, 10) understanding of the Being was future-oriented: ‘the origin always comes to meet us from the future’. Heidegger argued
that human temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) is a present anticipation of the end in relation to the past; hence, human time unfolds in the interaction between the temporal dimensions of past, present and future (Olsen 2012, 64, 221). Like Heidegger, Koselleck developed the notion of Being as conditioned by temporal-existential limitations and possibilities. However, by adding a number of further existential features, Koselleck reworked Heidegger’s notion of finality into a system of interpersonal and social relations: ‘From the beginning, the times of history are constituted interpersonally, and they always deal with the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, with determinations of difference that contain their own finitude and are not traceable back to an [individual human] “existence”’ (Koselleck 2018, 44–45).

Moreover, inspired by Johan Gottfried Herder, Koselleck (2004, 93–104) distinguished between three layers of temporal structures: the irreversibility of events, the repeatability of events, and the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit der Ungleichzeitigen*). The first layer is constituted by events that humans habitually experience as singular, for example, the French Revolution of 1789. This kind of experience is conditioned by the second layer, that of recursive structures. This should not, however, be understood in terms of history simply repeating itself, but rather that certain repeating patterns provide events with common features while the events themselves are always characterized by a singular dimension. There are, for instance, patterns that make us understand the events in France of 1789 as a revolution. The third layer refers to the varying extensions of time that move beyond individual and generational experience, and focuses on structures that transcend history. This involves what Koselleck called ‘the prognostic structure of historical time’ (95), which relates to how prognoses are rooted in the present, hence making them existent despite not actually having happened. Time is thus not simply linear and progressing from one period to another; instead, there are a multitude of historical times present at the same moment – what Koselleck (2018, 3–9) referred to as ‘sediments of time’ (*Zeitschichten*).

By understanding the Being as an essentially temporal phenomenon – unfolding in the interaction between the past, present and future – Koselleck developed a theory that focuses on the historical actors’ conceptions about time and finality. In line with this, he presented *experience* and *expectation* as formal categories that structure all history. The categories are formal in that their content cannot be deduced from them, and they are metahistorical in that they are fundamentally connected as
conditions for possible histories (Pickering 2010). Experience was defined as ‘present past’ and expectations as ‘the future made present’ (Koselleck 2004, 259). Thus, experience constitutes the dimension of the past that orients interpretations and actions in the present. Consequently, history represents past presents that include a future; what Koselleck conceptualized in his idea of past futures (Vergangene Zunkunft). However, Koselleck stated that humans orient themselves not only toward their experiences, but also toward the unknown future. This is particularly highlighted in his theorization of Modernity, in which Koselleck (2004, 26–42) discussed how the principle of historia magistra vitae was abandoned during the latter half of the eighteenth century, resulting in the possibility of imagining a future that was different from the past. As ideas of progress increased, time itself came to be seen as a continuous movement. This resulted in a temporal separation in which the present became separated from a past that had been worse, and a future that would be better; the good future became temporalized.5 In Koselleck’s (2004, 255–275) terminology, the historical categories of space of experience (Erfahrungsraum) and horizon of expectation (Erwartungshorizont) became disconnected.4

Koselleck (2004, 261) defined the concept of horizon by stating that: ‘The horizon is that line behind which a new space of experience will open, but which cannot be seen. The legibility of the future, despite possible prognoses confronts an absolute limit, for it cannot be experienced’. According to Koselleck, horizons represent temporal extensions from the present while at the same time marking out specific boundaries to these extensions. As such, the horizon constitutes not only a line but also a spatial-temporal field of vision similar to Gadamer’s ‘range of vision’. It is spatial in the sense of demarcating an interior and outer edge, conceptualizing the division between the known and the unknown. Temporally, it refers to the inherent subjectivity of the stretched dimensions of past, present and future (Ewing 2018). Consequently, our historical temporal situation is always located in-between; in the betweenness of the present in relation to the stretched past (in terms of experience) and the stretched future (in terms of expectation).

Venturing into the Koselleckian concept of horizon of expectation also requires a closer examination of the category of expectation. By introducing the conceptual pair of space of experience and horizon of expectation, Koselleck connected experience to a spatial dimension while expectation was related to a temporal understanding.5 In two separate essays, Koselleck (2004) cited the same passage of Count Graf Reinhard’s letter to Goethe in 1820, on the observation of an emergence of a different
historical temporality that was arising from events which seemed to surpass all previous experience: ‘past experience presents itself concentrated in a single focus, while that which has yet to be experienced is spread over minutes, hours, days, years, and centuries; thus similitude never appears to be the same, for in the one case one sees the whole, and in the latter only individual parts’ (38, 260). This led Koselleck to the conclusion that: ‘It makes sense to say that experience based on the past is spatial since it is assembled into a totality, within which many layers of earlier times are simultaneously present, without, however, providing any indication of the before and after’ (260), and that a ‘concluded experience is both complete and past, while those to be had in the future decompose into an infinity of different temporal perspectives’ (38).

Koselleck (2004, 259) used the concept of expectation in a broad sense: ‘Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity: all enter into expectation and constitute it’. The category of expectation thus represents a continuum stretching from what is empirically predictable to what is normatively desirable. This can be understood with reference to his notion of ‘the prognostic structure of historical time’. To expect something is, in this way, to already have it; hence, expecting essentially becomes waiting for actualization. Koselleck’s category of expectation thus follows in a straight line from Augustine’s (1912, 253) famous definition of expectation as ‘a present time of future things’.

Here, however, there is a need to reflect on whether all expectations are of the same sort or if the Koselleckian category bundles together different expectational modes. In English, the word ‘expectation’ can be used to denote strong hopes, but it is more associated with forecasts, prognoses and presumptions, that is, events that will happen in all likelihood. However, analytically, it seems reasonable to argue in favor of a qualitative difference between prognoses that are grounded in empirical evidence and hopes that are of a normative character (see also Pickering 2010; Escudier 2011). Moreover, if such a distinction can be made, the question is whether hopes and desires can be understood as transcending Koselleck’s horizontal line; or, put differently, if the utopian constitutes a category that involves a temporal mode of thinking that moves beyond our field of perception.

**The not-yet, the principle of hope, and the utopian function**

In his three-volume *magnum opus* titled *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch (1995) starts out from the ordinary daydream to argue that such
wakening dreams are expressions of internal longings. The feeling of lacking something is inherent in humans, and results in a drive toward what is not yet. The concept of Not-Yet is central to Bloch’s philosophy, and it contains two aspects: the Not-Yet-Conscious (Noch-Nicht-Bewufite) and the Not-Yet-Become (Noch-Nicht-Gewordener). The concept of the Not-Yet-Conscious is developed through a critique of Sigmund Freud in which Bloch rejects Freud’s conception of the unconscious as a kind of rubbish bin. To Bloch, the unconscious is also the pre-conscious; it is intrinsically creative and the source of the utopian impulse. What prevents the Not-Yet-Conscious from being a purely psychoanalytic category is its relationship to the Not-Yet-Become, a category that applies to material reality. Hence, what distinguishes the daydream from the night-dream is the strive toward fulfillment. Utopia was, to Bloch, the forward dream of what is Not-Yet. By using the yet he emphasized how utopia expresses possibility, and through the Not-Yet utopia was shifted from a descriptive to an analytic concept, defined in terms of a function that is both expressive and instrumental (Sargent 2010, 111; Levitas 2011, 101–102): ‘The imagination and the thoughts of future intention described in this way are utopian ... in the newly tenable sense of the forward dream, of anticipation in general. And so the category of the Utopian ... [is] turned towards the world: of overtaking the natural course of events. Thus understood, ... is the utopian function and its contents’ (Bloch 1995, 12). It is thus fundamental to Bloch’s argument that the world is essentially unfinished and in the process of becoming, and that the future is indeterminate and consequently constitutes a realm of possibilities.

Bloch was thus concerned with striving toward the future, and he stated that this originates from the present, from the feeling of an unfinished Being. Bloch used the principle of hope to designate his utopian thinking in a similar vein as Koselleck did with the category of expectation. To Bloch, however, hope is more fundamental than expectation because it does not need to be conscious; it is an inherent principle in every human action attempting to create change. Hope can be conscious and filled with real possibility, but most often it is in the form of the Not-Yet because what is possible is always changing due to human acts of hope; that is, actions that derive from the lack of something. Bloch made a distinction between the factually-objectively Possible (sachlich-objektiv Mögliche) that exists within the current boundaries of possibilities, and the objectively-real Possible (objektiv-real Mögliche) that derives from the changeability of the world and human agency of change. The temporality of hope displays as a plural present, containing
what Bloch called a non-contemporaneity (Ungleichzeitigkeit); a present that contains connections to a future Possible and to a past future that has previously been hindered. The temporality of hope is thus a present that is never finished but always moves toward something else, striving to realize new hopes (Bloch 1991, 97–116).

Although Bloch was occupied with issues of hope and utopia, he was no utopist as his philosophy was primarily mediated with real possibility. This is highlighted in his differentiation between abstract and concrete utopias. A concrete utopia is a vision that connects the Not-Yet with processes and possibilities. Bloch thus used concrete in its Hegelian sense; as something that can be approached by reflection and action in a way that it might eventually become reality. Hence, a concrete utopia should not be misunderstood to include some sort of blueprint for the future (Thomson 2013): ‘As a utopia mediated with process, it is concerned to deliver the forms and contents which have already been developed in the womb of present society’ (Bloch 1995, 623). An abstract utopia, on the other hand, is constituted by visions of a non-existent condition that is mediated without any references to historical processes or the factually-objectively Possible. It does, however, provide a long-term perspective that serves as an orientation for more short-term activities that strive toward something that may seem impossible. Hence, an abstract utopia is crucial in its contingent role within history, but meaningless in its own right (Thomson 2013).

The category of concrete utopia unites two subcategories: distant and proximate goals. A distant goal can, for example, be to end starvation in the world. This can be related to the factually-objectively Possible proximate goal to end an immediate starvation. ‘The principle of hope, is rooted not only in the force exerted by a distant goal and by the conditions governing the way to that goal, but, even more, in the manner in which that distant goal is involved in every proximate goal, making it a real goal and not just another more or less simple reproduction of past life’ (Bloch 2009, 239). However, the proximate should not be understood as a mere subcategory of the distant, or the other way around. Instead, there is a dialectic relationship between the categories; they are different aspects of one and the same historical phenomenon on a concrete historical level of reality (Nygaard 2014).

Bloch did not understand ideology and utopia as contradictory opposites. Instead, he outlined an intricate entanglement between ideology and utopia, suggesting a dialectic relationship between the categories. They are interlocked forces that are both separate and mutually interpenetrative at
the same time. According to Bloch (1995, 156), there is a surplus that transcends the original ideological context, and this surplus is of a concrete utopian nature because it ‘is produced by nothing other than the effect of the utopian function in the ideological creations of the cultural side’. The surplus consists of unfulfilled or unsatisfied hope content from the past. History is thus understood as a repository of possibilities; what could have been can still be (Kellner 2012). Bloch thus turns Mannheim’s criterion of realizability on its head; for Mannheim, an idea proves itself to be utopian only in retrospect, while for Bloch, a utopian idea distinguishes itself by having not yet been realized, in other words prospectively (Hempel 2019). According to Bloch (1995), it is the utopian surplus that makes ideology dependent on utopia. Without such a surplus, ‘ideologies would only have managed to create transitory deception’ (156). Utopia thus gives an appealing shine to ideology, which is necessary to uphold the current order. Simultaneously, Bloch suggested that it is through the utopia present in each ideology that a space outside of ideology is provided, hence making it possible to challenge the ideological order (Hempel 2019).

The utopian

Let us now return to Koselleck’s category of horizon of expectation. In the light of Bloch’s concept of utopia as the forward dream of the Not-Yet – in particular the distinction between abstract and concrete utopias that highlights the difference between the present boundaries of the Possible and any future ones which are dependent upon the changeability of the world, and the temporal differentiation of goals – it does seem as if the Koselleckian category bundles together modes of expectations and aspirations that could be kept apart analytically. In particular when taking Koselleck’s own definition of the horizon into consideration, the horizon constitutes an absolute limit in terms of futureness. Obviously, we cannot see the future, but we can still mediate visions of the future and what we hope it will be like regardless of the boundaries of possibilities that exist within the present. Hence, utopian thinking involves a temporal mode that transcends Koselleck’s horizontal line.

While the principle of hope is inherent in all forms of forward dreaming, it is possible to distinguish analytically between prognoses that are empirically probable and dreams and wishes of a normative character that will possibly be fulfilled. The concept of possibility should here be understood in the vein of Bloch’s Not-Yet, which relates to the Aristotelian category of potentiality; it signifies something that is not yet but that may come to be,
although it is at no time necessary for it to be so. Hence, there is a need to refine the category of horizon of expectation and to supplement it with another one. Rather than discussing visions of the future as one coherent category, there is a need for one category that deals with the empirically probable and predictable (horizon of expectation), and one category that is related to the objectively-real Possible and hence relates to what might become possible; the utopian. While expectations – in terms of prognoses – can be understood as being visible on the horizon, the utopian is related to ideas and visions that transcend, and thus lie beyond, such a horizon.

This distinction makes it possible to separate between present futures that represent visions of the future that are restricted by current possibilities and future presents that are constituted by visions that may be rendered from experience but that are outside of the present possibilities. Hence, what is not a present possibility can be understood as a Not-Yet-Possible; or, put differently, what exists contains within it repositories of past failures and future dreams that function as driving forces in a non-contemporaneous way. The utopian points to long-term perspectives and ideas that may be outside the realm of the present Possible, but that are concrete in a Blochian sense. Hence, the utopian provides a long-term orientation to actions that aim for more proximate goals.

The utopian in political thinking

While horizontal politicking in the post-Cold War era may – as François Hartog (2003) and others (e.g. Hölscher 2013; Gumbrecht 2014; Assmann 2020) have argued – have resulted in a shortening of horizons in the presentist Zeitgeist, it is still impossible to imagine politics without horizons. Pierre Rosanvallon (2006) states that the political must be understood as both a field and a project. As a project, it is ‘an always contentious process whereby the explicit or implicit rules of what they [a human collectivity] can share and accomplish in common . . . are elaborated’ (34). Moreover, Jacques Rancière (2007, 11) argues that ‘Politics is the art of suppressing the political’. Thus, while politics can be understood as a strive toward an imagined fulfillment, the political is in constant reformation and hence never reaches finality. Political quests toward finality will always be renegotiated and redefined, as they combine ‘the dream of the good and the reality of indeterminacy’ (36). Political thinking is thus in a constant temporal motion that continuously challenges the horizons of possibilities in a utopian way.
With the introduction of the category of the utopian, the long-termness of politics is highlighted. Political actors are motivated not only by calculable prognoses but also by hopes, dreams and wishes, even if these cannot be fully defined in terms of finality. The utopian should hence be understood as an analytical, yet historically grounded, category aiming to understand how political actors have interpreted their present – including the temporal extensions of present pasts and present futures – and acted in relation to long-term goals in the form of visions of future presents. The fact that the utopian cannot be fully defined is what gives hopes and dreams continuous vitality; it is what nourishes the political to its constant reformation.

In the same vein as Bloch, utopia is here primarily understood in terms of function; it is about creating a distance from the present in the desire for a better life. ‘The utopian function is estrangement and defamiliarization, rendering the taken-for-granted world problematic, and calling into question the actually existing state of affairs, not the imposition of a plan for the future’ (Levitas 2000, 39). Utopia thus points toward change. However, it does not have to be empirically probable or possible; it merely needs to be believed to be so in order to mobilize political action. The political function of utopia is thus a matter of believed possibility.

To conclude, the category of the utopian is constituted by visions that are, as Jameson (2004, 54) correctly states, ‘non-fictional, even though they are non-existent’. Although they may turn out to be mere illusions, utopian hopes and dreams are necessary illusions; it is the often rather unrealistic dreams that carry the seeds of change and improvement. Moreover, utopian illusions need to be taken into consideration in order to gain a systematic historical understanding of the multitude of effects that these illusions have. In other words, a thorough understanding of utopian illusions contains the key to the full spectrum of historical phenomena that exist in the relationship between actual conditions and future goals incorporated into different modes of temporality.

Notes

1. As Koselleck (2002, 84) himself noted, even ‘writers of utopias only reluctantly call themselves “utopians”’.
2. The academic interest in the multiplicity of time has been expressed in conceptualizations such as ‘percolating’, ‘multilayered’, ‘heterogeneous’, ‘multitemporal’ and ‘polychronic time’ (Tamm and Olivier 2019).
3. Koselleck’s theory of historical times has been commented on as a theory of periodization (e.g. Osborne 1992; Zammito 2004; Hunt 2008). These interpretations have, however, been criticized by Helge Jordheim (2012), who argues that Koselleck’s theory should be understood as a theory developed to defy periodization as Koselleck attempted to replace the idea of linear and homogenous time with a more complex and multilayered notion of temporality.

4. The increased gap between the space of horizon and the horizon of expectation has, however, been questioned by Andreas Shinkel (2005), who argues that the categories cannot drift apart, only change in relation to one another. Schinkel motivates this by adding a third category, that of imagination, which he places between experience and expectation to signify how experiences can be used to think up the possibility of something different for the future. However, as Schinkel places imagination between experience and expectation, his expectations are, at least to some degree, grounded in experiences. Thus, Schinkel’s imagination is restricted by experiences and they are consequently within the horizon of expectation.

5. While Koselleck reserved the concept of horizon for futurity, it can fruitfully be used to denote a broader diversity of temporal extensions from a given situation. As Michael Pickering (2010) argues, Michail Bakhtin’s rejection of ‘the false tendency toward reducing everything into a single consciousness, toward dissolving in it the other’s consciousness’ points to the distance between different historical horizons. Exchanging the terms for Koselleck’s conceptual couplet for the experiences of historical time shifts the balance ‘from possible stasis to possible change’ (277). This correlates to Bloch’s (1995, 11) understanding of the unconscious as the pre-conscious. In other words, the past is not present as a spatial totality but rather as a horizon in which we only recognize the present past albeit admitting the ontological existence of a past that is Not-Yet-Conscious.

6. The careful reader will find some minor differences between the two quotations. These are, however, likely due to the English translations as they point to the same reference.

7. Koselleck’s category of horizon of expectation has also been criticized for failing to take into account the dialectic of the expected and the unexpected (see Osborne 2017, 202–211).

8. Rainer E. Zimmermann (2013) has pointed to how the concept of utopia carries connotations of its own impossibility due to the Greek prefix ou, which makes it impossible per definition. Instead, Zimmermann argues that Bloch’s concrete utopia should be understood as a form of ‘metopia’, as the prefix mé relates to a relative form of negation rather than the ou’s absolute form. A metopia suggests that something is not yet, but that it could be.

9. This understanding of ‘possibility’ is thus in contrast to the Kantian formal-logical conception of possibility in which anything that is thinkable without contradiction is possible. For, as Peter Osborne (2006) argues, in order to function as a political category, ‘utopia must be more than “logically” possible; it must be conceived of in some sense as actual, albeit elsewhere, otherwise it could not function as an image of fulfillment.
10. As an example, during the interwar years, the Swedish Left constantly argued in favor of several reforms that were defined by features of a complete democracy, such as referenda, a republican form of state, and a unicameral parliament. However, the idea of a complete democracy was given such a future-oriented temporality that it cannot be understood as something that the political actors expected to be achieved through these concrete reforms; it was rather something that they dreamed of or hoped for in the far future. As the idea of a complete democracy could not be fully determined or defined, it was not visible on the actors’ horizon of expectation but achieved by the kind of political imagining that constitutes the category of the utopian (Friberg 2020).

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