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Abstract

Our current condition is characterized by a palpable absence of utopian perspectives on the future. Concepts such as capitalist realism (Fisher 2009) or petrified politics (Pötzsch 2023) are meant to address the fact famously articulated by Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek that “today, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (cited in Fisher 2009). An increasing socio-economic precarity of growing numbers of people worldwide combined with technological systems the business models of which systematically create and amplify polarizing negative affects and emotions have created a perfect storm for civil societies already brought to the brink of break down by 3 decades of relentless neo-liberalization (Dean 2009, Brown 2015, 2019, Fraser 2022, Chamayou 2019). Without utopian visions of popular political alternatives, we are left with what Habermas (2019 [1985]) has termed “a desert of banalities and cluelessness”. Within such frames, populism regularly pops up as the go-to buzzword for neo-liberal elites intending to undermine any genuinely popular political movement vying for a real alternative to the current mess (Ali 2015).

In this contribution, I argue that to be able to challenge the negative double-bind of growing precarity and increasing polarization under conditions of global financialized tech-capitalism, we need a genuinely progressive populism that takes seriously the very real fears, anxieties, anger, and problems of a majority of the world’s populations faced with increasingly pathologic levels of hypocrisy and double-standards among globally dominating elites. To make this argument, I follow the framework of Ruth Levitas’ (2013) and combine it with key tenets of critical future studies (Goode and Godhe 2017). Levitas proposes a threefold application of the term utopia as components or steps in a method to facilitate an imaginary reconstitution of societies through progressive future-bound change: 1) archaeology of utopia, 2) utopian ontologies, and 3) architectures of utopia. The archaeological mode asks what utopian visions are out there and which are lacking. Levitas looks into political programmes and social policies. I argue also the cultural sphere has decisive influence on what is, and what is not perceived as possible and preferable futures. The ontological mode directs attention to the types of people and identities that are implicitly or explicitly produced and naturalized in given hegemonic orders, while the architectural



mode searches for, highlights, and attempts to actively realize concrete alternatives underneath the surface of the apparently given.

As an empirical example I will offer some thoughts on how the graphic novel *König der Vagabunden* (Spät and Davies 2019) following the German vagabond Gregor Gog and his attempts to form a homeless movement during the Weimar Republic articulates the figuration of the road as an inherently subversive micro-utopian space that enables new identities and collective practices of mobilisation and resistance. The very physical and shared concrete space of the road produces specific subjectivities (ontological mode) and points to concrete alternatives for political mobilization and action aimed at necessary progressive change (architectural mode). Through Levitas (2013) and Goode and Godhe (2017), I argue that the imaginary of the road as a liveable micro-utopian alternative articulated in *König der Vagabunden* can serve as an inspiration for collective political action beyond the received frames of nation states also at our present moment of history.

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