

National Research University  
Higher School of Economics

As a manuscript

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**THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS OF POLITICAL UTOPIA  
IN WESTERN MARXISM**

SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION  
for the purpose of obtaining the academic degree  
Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

Academic Supervisor:  
Doctor of Science, professor  
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Moscow, 2023

## *Statement of research problem*

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, almost unpredictable for most of the Western Left, and for political theory in general (Isaac, 1995), marked the final destruction of the radical left political project. Despite the contradictions between the socialist camp and the Western Left, the Soviet experience remained symbolic of the very possibility of an alternative to capitalism (Therborn, 2008). As a result, the last decade of the 20th century passed under the banner of the liberal triumph of “the end of history” (Fukuyama, 1989) and, on the other hand, “left-wing melancholia” (Traverso, 2016). Despite the tactical political successes in the first two decades of the 21st century, such as the anti-globalization movement, the Occupy Wall Street protests, the emergence of “pirate parties”, the victory of SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain, the Yellow Vest Protests in France, the left fails to achieve strategic changes in the global status quo and fails to maintain political power for long, at least without ceasing to be the radical left. The fact that different practical strategies, implemented in different social and economic contexts, lead to similar results, raises the question of the ongoing *conceptual crisis of the contemporary left*, which arose as a result of the maladaptation of traditional forms of thought and the practices of struggle in relation to the newest configuration of capitalism at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s.

Commenting on the state of affairs towards the end of the 20th century, the Frederick Jameson once noted that “*it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism*” (Jameson, 2003). Even before that, Jurgen Habermas started talking about the exhaustion of utopian energies in contemporary thinking (Habermas, 1986). In other words, the current situation of the left is determined by the crisis of one of the central concepts of left political thinking, the concept of utopia. This crisis does not consist in the formal academic vagueness of the concept, but in the fact that utopia for the left in the current conditions no longer fulfills its political function of recognizing possible alternatives and organizing political action around them. Even authors who are optimistic about the possibilities

for the rise of the left against the backdrop of the crisis of global capitalism are forced to admit that this crisis in itself does not yet facilitate the search for possible alternatives (Žižek, 2009; Budraitis, Matveev, 2018). Moreover, the imperative “*There Is No Alternative*” is today the main legitimizing narrative of the established political and economic order (Kapustin, 2010), which does not insist on its ideality, but declares itself as the only acceptable form of those that are achievable (Žižek, 1989). Thus, we find ourselves in the reality of “*subjectless politics*” (Kapustin, 2009), “*post-politics*” (Mouffe, 2005) and “*post-democracy*” (Rancière, 1995; Crouch, 2003), which reproduces itself, in particular, through the problematization of the possibilities of utopian thinking.

This problematization requires some explanation. The above is not to say that utopia is the only concept with which the left now has problems. Nor does it explain why political theory should be interested in solving the problems of leftist thought. However, it is precisely the crisis state of affairs in connection with *this concept*, which for a long time was fueled by the theoretical resources of the left tradition and was embodied in its practices, which has an important heuristic significance for political theory in general. If we accept the thesis that *criticism of the status quo* is one of the key tools for understanding reality, then today we are forced to diagnose serious problems with the applicability of this tool in the area where criticism about or questioning the status quo requires a point of support alternative to it,<sup>1</sup> although, of course, not every criticism needs one. *This point can be a utopia*. In other words, the question of the crisis of utopia is, first of all, the question of the crisis in the understanding of existing politics, which positions itself as non-utopian, and the inability to discern its dynamics and structural problems that may be hidden behind external self-representation. Thus, **the problem of the study** is *the limited heuristic and critical potential of political theory, arising from the conceptually ambiguous and contested status of the concept of utopia in leftist political theory*. By the ambiguous and contested status of utopia, I mean not the problem of the absence of

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<sup>1</sup> See Bourdieu, 1994; Jameson, 2004; Agamben, 1998; Benjamin, 1995.

a once and for all fixed and indisputable definition of utopia, but the fact that a number of contemporary left theorists (primarily those who have been influenced by the Marxist tradition, or who directly belong to it) are ready in principle to refuse this concept, or reduce it to practical strategies of struggle (Callinikos, 2003; Srnicek, Williams, 2015) or other theoretical concepts, such as subject (Hardt, Negri, 2004; Virno, 2004), procedure (Habermas, 1996), or structural characteristics of politics (Mouffe, 2005), as a result of which the very space of speaking about utopia may disappear.

In this case, **the research question** is *how is it possible for a political utopia to exist within Western Marxism at the present time?* Analytically, this question can be divided into **two parts**: (1) *What are the theoretical premises of the contested status of utopia in the tradition of Western Marxism?* (2) *What are the contemporary conceptual conditions, obstacles, and opportunities for the existence of the political utopia of Western Marxism?*

#### *Justification of study boundaries and literature review*

Some authors identify political theory as such with utopia (Lassman, 2003) or identify utopian premises underlying sociological thinking (Jacobsen, Tester, 2012). The topic of utopia goes not only beyond the boundaries of political theory, up to the separation of utopian studies into a disciplinary direction, but also beyond the boundaries of the scientific field as such, appearing as an important component of a number of religious teachings, objects of art culture, and products of journalistic discourse. Based on this, it is necessary to clarify that in this paper I talk about *utopia as a political-theoretical concept and at the same time the phenomenon of the world of politics*,<sup>2</sup> but not about utopia as a genre of a work of art of the same name (see Chalikova, 1994), the concept of art theory (see Groys, 1993) and the object of

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<sup>2</sup> Since in the case of utopia, “*concept is indistinguishable from its reality, whose ontology coincides with its representation*” (Jameson, 2004).

methodological discussions (see Vakhshayn<sup>3</sup>, 2014), given the inevitable subtlety of these **thematic boundaries of the study**. The non-Western and pre-modern premises of utopianism in new European Western thought are also not considered, since they do not form a coherent tradition of political-theoretical thinking (see Kumar, 2003).

Finally, contemporary left thought as such was considered at the level of problematization, but it seems impossible to choose it as the object of dissertation research, because, firstly, of the impossible scope of such a task, and secondly, due to the conceptual and normative contestability of the boundaries of the concept of “left”. Therefore, the dissertation is centered around one of the central currents of contemporary left thought, *Western Marxism* (see Merleau-Ponty, 1973 Anderson, 1976; Kellner, 2005; Therborn, 2008). This choice is connected with the dual role of the Marxist tradition for the concept and theory of utopia. On the one hand, it was Marxism (more precisely, its Western branch) that turned out to be the most theoretically developed direction of left thought. On the other hand, Marxism has been largely responsible for the problems of the concept of utopia, both in the theoretical aspect of Marx's critique of utopia and in its central political experience. The Soviet project, which opened up the GULAG experience, problematic for utopian aspirations, positioned itself precisely as a Marxist project, despite all the discussions on this issue among historians of ideas and political theorists. On the contrary, the Western tradition arose in isolation from the Soviet experience and followed the path of separating theory from political practice (Anderson, 1976): Western Marxism is a tradition generated by its tragic recognition and understanding of *the absence of revolution* in European countries and the USA. Therefore, Western Marxism here is understood not as a political movement, but *as a theoretical tradition in European and American philosophy, sociology, and political theory, based on the interpretation of the works of Karl Marx and, to a lesser extent, those of Friedrich Engels. It is opposed to the naturalism and scientism of the “scientific*

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<sup>3</sup> Included in the list of media outlets performing the functions of a foreign agent.

*Marxism*” of the Second and Third Internationals, and expressed in a limited set of canonical texts from the 1920s to the present, without drawing its “upper” chronological boundary on any specific event like the collapse of the USSR or a process like the dissolution of the old working class in European societies. Western Marxism is conceptualized as a lasting tradition insofar as the constellation of conditions that gave rise to it has not been overcome or removed: the inheritance of Marx's call for emancipation when it is impossible to literally implement it through the revolution<sup>4</sup>. These are the **boundaries of the object of the study**.

In this sense, the crisis of Western Marxism in the context of the problem of utopia is comparable to the crisis of *Modernity* as such: the disappearance of utopias is the general problem of self-awareness of the modern world (Mannheim, 1994: 207-219). Modernity is understood here in a philosophical sense, as )) a political and cultural reality, constituted approximately from the 15th-16th centuries, the era of the Great Geographical Discoveries, by some common characteristics (for example, the divergence of the substantial mind (Habermas, 2005a)) and structures (for example, capital (Marx, 1952; Nancy, 1991)) in which we, Marx, and the Marxists of the middle of the 20th century are the contemporaries. In this sense, speculations about utopia in the Marxist tradition of the last century and a half are discussed as both causes and manifestations of the *modern* crisis of political utopia in the second and third chapters of the thesis. At the same time, it is obvious that Modernity re-actualizes itself in a specific, current-existing form (*contemporaneity*), which reflects its basic attitudes and contradictions in a new way (for more details, see Kapustin, 1998: 13-33). Therefore, the first chapter analyzes the projections of the philosophical attitudes of Modernity on the temporal features of today's (*contemporary*) Western societies, as well as the features of capitalism of the 21st century, which serve as the background against which the consideration of the tradition of Western Marxism is then correlated. That is **the structure of the study**,

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<sup>4</sup> Thus, the concept of Western Marxism proposed here rather emphasizes the essential unity of tradition, in contrast to the more common concept of post-Marxism, which already at the level of its etymology emphasizes the overcoming of classical Marxism, although it is spelled out to varying degrees by different authors (Pavlov, 2021a; Pavlov, 2021b).

based on the assumption that the mentioned crisis of utopia can be adequately comprehended only at the intersection of these two coordinates of the “modern” and “contemporary”.

Narrowing the focus further, it should be emphasized that contemporary Marxist discussions about the crisis of utopia are unfolding in the context of permanent attempts by the left to challenge the consensus on the transition to *a post-ideological society*, which has been developing since the second half of the 20th century (Lipset, 1960; Bell, 1962; Fukuyama, 1989; de Berg, 2012). In parallel, the utopian claims of the left, and in particular of Marxist thought, have been subjected to normative criticism by Friedrich von Hayek (Hayek, 1944), Karl Popper (Popper, 1945) and Raymond Aron (Aron, 1957). Later, the constructive potential of utopian thinking was also implicitly disavowed by system theory in the version of Niklas Luhmann (see Müller, 2011). Further criticism of utopias was developed in the empirical study of utopian elements in the practices of totalitarian regimes (Amis, 2002; Sørensen, 2010) and, more broadly, failed modernization projects around the world (Scott, 1998). In other words, the possibility of the presence of utopia was questioned both at the descriptive level (“utopias no longer exist”) and at the normative level (“utopias are dangerous and should not exist”).

In this situation, the basic theoretical strategy is to turn to the analysis of the historical material of the Western Marxist tradition in order to clarify its relationship to utopia (Oizerman, 2003; Geoghegan, 2008). First of all, the debate revolves around the starting point, the famous critique by Marx and Engels of their predecessors in the form of utopian socialists in the “Communist Manifesto” (Marx, Engels, 1888; for interpretations of this criticism, see Bagaturia, 1972; Szacki, 1990; Oizerman, 2001; Abensour, 2017; Fischbach, 2017). Criticism of the influential legacy of the Frankfurt School (Davydov, 1977; Anderson, 1976; Stuart, 2016) and the search for ways to overcome the current crisis by turning to other resources of Marxism, such as the “philosophy of hope” of Ernst Bloch (Privatization of Hope, 2013), become another reference point. Such appeals to tradition also aim to resolve specific contemporary issues, such as the relationship between utopia and

globalization (Vodolazov, 1975; Harvey, 2000), utopia and postmodernism (Jameson, 1991), etc. On the other hand, an important contribution to the study of the interaction between Marxism and utopia is also made by the papers of non-Marxist authors devoted to the question of the history of the development of utopia as such (Buber, 1958; Manuel, Manuel 1979; Kumar, 1987).

Another possibility of theorizing utopia today is associated with a functional approach that distances itself from the “*unanswerable question*” (Jameson, 2004) about its content, since the latter is directly a political construct and is always connected with *the political perspective* from which the statement about utopia is produced (about the leading role of the functional approach in utopia studies, see Levitas, 2010). From the point of view of its function, *utopia is an orientation transcendent in relation to the current reality, which simultaneously does not correspond to it and undermines it, expressing in this incongruity the latent tension of reality itself and containing a transformative function* (Mannheim, 1936; Turner, 2003) *and criticism of established “common sense”* (see Bauman, 1976: 65-69). The contradiction between reality and a utopian project is fundamental, not reducible, for instance, to the question of technological possibilities, but at the same time historically concrete, since reality itself is historically concrete (Mannheim, 1936). Thus, the transcendence of utopia in relation to reality is *an immanent transcendence*, that is, the articulation of hitherto unactualized manifestations of reality itself. Utopia differs from sociologically “adequate” thinking about reality in that it “overtakes” the real state of affairs, while ideology, on the contrary, “lags behind” its course (Mannheim, 1936).

This pathos of transformation is the key difference between *pre-modern* (from Antiquity to the beginning of the era of revolutions in Europe) *and modern utopias*. The former do not pretend to be realized, thus being not only “nowhere”, but also “never”. The latter, on the contrary, place the image of an ideal society in a relatively concrete future, which can be approximated by the sum of the actions of real people, so their “nowhere” turns out to be temporalized; they are impossible *right now*, but not in principle. Terminologically, this distinction is articulated as the distinction

between “melancholic” and “nostalgic” utopias (Shklar, 1965), “abstract” and “concrete” utopias (utopias in the mode of “not-yet”) (Bloch, 1963); “utopias” and “uchronias” (Koselleck, 2002). On the other hand, in the last three decades, the thesis of *an already victorious utopia*, in the reality of which we live today, has been increasingly articulated. It could be the utopia of global capitalism (Žižek, 2009; Eagleton, 2011), the accompanying liberalism (Rozanvallon, 1999), the overcoming of sexual differentiation (Baudrillard, 1986), etc. It is utopia, which at the moment of triumph turns into its own functional invariant: ideology. Thus, the functional approach allows us to see not so much the purely mental as the ontological nature of utopia, which is a good position for theorizing political utopia today.

Likewise, the complete definition of politics or the political would itself be a political statement, since the question of the limits of the political is *the first political question* (Schmitt, 2004). Instead, it is more correct to say that this research proceeds from *a conflict approach to understanding the political*, which means considering the political as the logic of interaction between subjects in the modus of a fundamental conflict, that is, a conflict that can neither be reduced to a purely technical solution in economic logic, nor subjected to removal through moral universalization, and which potentially calls into question the very foundations of the social order (Mouffe, 2005: 8-34). Therefore, talking about “political” utopia, I mean the need to theorize it as a specifically political way of thinking and acting that is not reducible to purely economic (or “technocratic”) or ethical ideas about how social processes are or should be arranged.

### *The goal and objectives of the study*

**The goal of the study** is revealing the conceptual conditions for the (im)possibility of the political utopia of Western Marxism at the present time as the content of its contemporary crisis.

### **Objectives of the study:**

1. To clarify the specifics of the temporal regimes of modernity and postmodernity for the (im)possibility of unfolding political utopias within their framework.

2. To clarify the specifics of the contemporary configuration of capitalism for the (im)possibility of unfolding the utopia of Western Marxism within its framework.

3. To reconstruct the context, causes, and content of criticism of utopia and its implicit theorizing by the founders of Marxism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

4. To reconstruct the context, reasons, and key manifestations of the crisis of utopia in Western Marxism on the example of the Frankfurt School as an “ideal type” of this tradition.

### *Theoretical and methodological foundations of the study*

The difficulty in developing methodological foundations for theoretical research goes far beyond the controversy between political theory and positivist philosophy (see Horkheimer, 1972; Lukács, 1972). As Isaiah Berlin explains, this complexity is related to the nature of the problems that political theory poses (Berlin, 1980). First, it deals with the class of *philosophical problems*, which do not contain in their formulation an implicit indication of methods for solving them. Based on this, it makes sense to talk not so much about precisely formalized “methods” as about fundamentally pluralistic *approaches* in political theory. Secondly, in discussing these problems, political theory is not limited to an exclusively descriptive mode, but it formulates value arguments and uses *normative concepts*, disagreements around which have fundamental grounds in the social ontology of the disputing parties. Continuing with Berlin, it is possible to add that being capable of producing criticism or apologia for the status quo and specific policies, political theory itself begins to function as a phenomenon of the political world.

In the most explicit way, these philosophical intuitions find their methodological expression in Reinhart Koselleck's **project of conceptual history** (*Begriffsgeschichte*), which proposes to turn not to a pure "history of the spirit", but to the history of concepts in changing social contexts. A combined method is proposed: studying the use of concepts in specific temporal contexts (*synchronic analysis*) and further highlighting the general meanings of the concepts by separating them from these contexts (*diachronic analysis*) (Koselleck, 2004). Throughout modern history, especially during the "saddle time" (*die Sattelzeit*), dating from about 1750-1850, many social and political concepts changed their meaning in the course of the "struggle of ideas" with each other in connection with the struggle of different social and political practices. It means that concepts are simultaneously democratized, temporalized, ideologized, and politicized (Koselleck, 2011: 10-15). Thus, specific social situations become "fields of struggle" for concepts that already exist and arise within them. At the same time, not only the contexts affect the content of concepts, but concepts also transform the contexts of modernity. In social conflicts, concepts act *simultaneously* as objects and tools of intellectual struggle, they can be reinterpreted and appropriated by the winning side, and they can also redefine the image of the parties in the eyes of themselves and each other. In this sense, the method of conceptual history is like a pendulum that removes the traditional opposition between the objects of the history of ideas and social history (Koselleck, 2011: 17-18). An awareness of this tension allows us in each case to reflect on the boundaries of *the space of experience* that defines the concept, as well as to evaluate its *horizon of expectation*, thereby linking together the past, present, and future of the concept (Koselleck, 2004: 89-90; 255-276).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, the strategy of combining conceptual and social history is the most effective for revealing the causes of the contemporary crisis of utopia and tracking the political consequences of this crisis. However, such a study can be carried out in full only by a large team of specialists with the appropriate political-theoretical and historical qualifications (as happened in the case of the "Basic Concepts in History: A Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany" by Koselleck and his colleagues). Therefore, this thesis concentrates on the "conceptual", theoretical pole of this pendulum movement, only externally appealing to its correlation in the form of the history of social practices.

The object of the application of conceptual history is *the basic historical concepts (Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe)*, i.e. concepts, the use of which contributes to the understanding of the structures and the most important connections of events (Koselleck, 2011: 8). The concept of utopia can be recognized as such since it corresponds to at least three of the six possible modes of such concepts. This concept is related to classifying constitutions, to political, social and economic organizations, and it also claims a theoretical role in ideologies, the role of structuring and interpreting human activity in politics and labor (Koselleck, 2011: 8). Next, I use the understanding of utopia as a *temporalized concept* or *concept of movement (Bewegungsbegriff)*, i.e. the concept that is not just a description of a certain state of affairs (“republic”), but also includes a shade of its expectation, movement towards it, and integration for the sake of this movement (“republicanism”) (Koselleck, 2011: 11-12). Such an understanding also implies an attitude to utopia as a category from *the horizon of expectation*, which cannot be reducible to the already existing *space of experience* fully. Modern utopias, according to Koselleck, are always transferred to the near or distant future and, due to temporal remoteness, can no longer be grasped in the focus of existing experience (Koselleck, 2002: 87).

Taking into account the fact that some authors may not have addressed the topic of utopia purposefully, considering it in a wider range of issues or using it “on the contrary”, the conceptual history approach also prescribes considering concepts that are *parallel* to the concept under investigation (that is, they include similar content but in the form of another signifier), or *asymmetrically opposite* to it. The latter means concepts which stand in opposition to the researched concept and have an obvious normative or ontological preponderance in this opposition, which makes it possible to deny the initial concept from this point of view (Koselleck, 2004: 86-89, 155-191). Such conceptual substitutions and oppositions, often made for specific historical reasons, are also included in the focus of this work. Thus, **comparative method** and **hermeneutic method** are also used in the research as elements of the conceptual history approach. Comparison, as can be seen from the studies of Koselleck and his colleagues (see, for example, Koselleck, 2004; Günter et al.,

2014), is an integral part of working with concepts. By comparing different concepts with each other, researcher can show the limits of their applicability relative to each other and focus on the reasons why in specific contexts one concept is replaced by another, outwardly similar to it. At the same time, the concept itself is re-interpreted each time in different linguistic and social contexts, taking into account its function and location in the text, author's judgments in relation to it, unique semantic shades that arise in combinations with other concepts, thereby enriching the understanding of the meaning of the concept under study (see Tribe, 2004: XVI-XVII about the influence of Gadamer's hermeneutical problematic on Koselleck's approach).

### *Contribution to the discussion of the problem*

1. Consideration of the problem using the methods of conceptual history allows us not only to understand the theoretical moves of the theorists of Western Marxism “essentially”, but also to analyze their formation in the specific contexts of conflicts with other concepts.

2. Combining the analysis of the theoretical premises internal to the tradition of Western Marxism with the analysis of specifically contemporary external conditions provides an opportunity to point out the limitations and transformations of classical arguments in today's realities (for example, the need to update classical *radical demands*).

3. The inclusion of related concepts and theoretical arguments (for example, “messianic time”) in the study of the utopia of Western Marxism allows us to outline the boundaries of the concept of utopia more clearly and provide a new definition for it, developing the classical functional conceptualization of the utopia by Karl Mannheim.

## *Statements to be defended*

1. In the temporal regime of modernity, unlike postmodernity, it is conceptually possible to unfold utopia as a political project due to the fundamental openness of modernity to qualitative transformations, but at the same time, other constitutive characteristics of modernity (the tendency to self-closure, permanent self-renewal, the colonization of time) problematize the possibilities of utopian thinking.

2. In the context of the neoliberal transformation of capitalism at the turn of the 1970s-1980s, labor and capital underwent a number of changes (development of precarious and cognitive labor, and financialization and globalization of capital), which made irrelevant the classical utopias of the left, oriented mainly towards the industrial working class and its political and economic requirements. The minimum, but not exhaustive, conditions for the possibility of functioning in the social reality of new utopias are their correlation with different (capitalist and non-capitalist) ways of globalization (as opposed to classical, local utopias), as well as with the implicit utopianism of “guaranteed economic growth” inherent in capitalism itself.

3. Corresponding to the neoliberal configuration of capitalism, the biopolitical mode of governance in contemporary Western societies problematizes the possibilities of utopian thinking outside the status quo, due to the fact that biopolitics produces its own subject, replacing the possible subject of political changes; denies politics as an area of contingent choice of social development alternatives under the pretext of ensuring security and comfort of the produced subject, thereby putting limit to normative, including utopian, thinking about politics; and includes a critique of power as its own control technology.

4. The criticism of *the certain type of utopias* (static, transcendent in relation to the existing reality and, at the same time, insufficiently radical in relation to it) is articulated and reproduced by Marx and Engels in specific contexts of polemics with other areas of socialist thought and, thus, acts as a rhetorical weapon to strengthen the positions of the founders of Marxism. Then, the distinction between “utopian”

and “scientific” communism is uncritically reproduced in political and research texts in the rank of essential criticism of *any utopias*, ignoring both the context factor and the textual nuances of the argumentation of Marx and Engels.

5. Hidden utopianism in the thinking of Marx and Engels is revealed through the concepts of radical demand, absolute negativity, and community transcending the status quo. *Radical demand* is a demand for a specific change, which, through a chain of logical relationships, entails the reorganization of the entire social world when it is fulfilled. The ontological instance of this requirement is *absolute negativity*, that is a social group, in its existence expressing all forms of need, which in principle cannot be satisfied in the given configuration of social existence. By coming together to reshape the status quo, the members of this group form a *community* in which they cease to be each other's embodiments of real abstractions of labor or capital, which ipso facto means transcending the status quo of capitalism.

6. The crisis of utopia in Western Marxism within the framework of the Frankfurt School is manifested in the fact that the recognition of both the totality of the status quo and the immanence of the critic's position in it leads the representatives of the School (Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin), respectively, to three possible attitudes from the point of view of utopianism: a negative pure criticism without utopia; “unnamed” utopianism; and an alternative to the utopian messianic way of thinking and (non-) acting.

7. Utopia is defined as an unguaranteed but binding promise of a good life, impossible in the present for fundamental but concrete historical reasons, ergo functionally “undermining” the concrete historical status quo.

### *Conferences*

1. IX All-Russian Congress of Political Scientists “Russia and political order in a changing world: values, institutions, prospects”. “*Postmodernity as a (not) Time for Utopia*”. RPSA, Moscow. 2021.

2. Research Seminar of the HSE Doctoral School of Political Science. “*The Modern Configuration of Capitalism as a Condition and a Problem for the Political Utopia of Western Marxism*”. HSE University, Moscow. 2022.

### *Papers*

In HSE University List of Highly Ranked Journals:

1. Inshakov I.A. Modernity as a Time for Utopia // *Politeia*. 2022. № 1(104). P. 7-23.
2. Inshakov I.A. Interrelation of Scientific and Utopian Elements in the Political Thinking of Karl Marx // *Political Science (RU)*. 2023. № 3. (in the press)
3. Inshakov I.A. The Concept of Messianic time by Walter Benjamin and Its Political Implications // *Russian Sociological Review*. 2023. T. 22. № 1. P. 29-47.

### *Thesis summary*

The first chapter analyzes the current context of Western societies to determine the (im)possibility of the conceptual unfolding of utopian projects in them. To do this, two competing (self-)descriptions of these societies are compared with each other in terms of their temporal parameters. There are descriptions of societies as modern or postmodern. It is shown that the language of postmodern description blocks the conceptual possibilities of unfolding utopia due to its distrust in the production of truths about the world that utopias claim, the rejection of metanarratives and the fundamental role of ironic detachment. In turn, the temporal regime of modernity is a possible, but problematic context for utopian thinking due to its inherent dialectic of the openness of history and the tendency to self-closure, permanent self-renewal, counter to utopia as a project of a specific radical change, and the colonization of the time of subjects living in modern societies.

An analysis of Western societies from a political-economic point of view shows a similar contradiction. The internal contradictions of capitalism in its current

configuration reinforce the request for a left-wing utopia, but its complicated structure (financialization, globalization, precarious and cognitive labor) makes the classical utopian constructions of the left irrelevant. Finally, the biopolitical regime of governance as “care of the subject” problematizes both the existence of the subject of political action and the possibility of offering an alternative positive program for the political dispensation of society. The theoretical arguments about utopia within the framework of Western Marxism, which are explicated below, are related to this problematic context.

The second chapter, first of all, contextualizes the famous criticism by Marx and Engels of utopians: it shows that the concept of utopia plays the role of an offensive weapon in political rhetoric to strengthen, in contrast, one's own political and philosophical position in the struggle for supporters. Further, the opposition of utopianism / Marxism, as set by Marx and Engels, is interpreted from the content side: as the opposition of the static / dynamic and the transcendent / immanent. In such dimensions, the Marxist critique of utopia turns out to be a critique not of utopias as such, but of *a specific type of utopia*, and this critique is consistent with the general emphasis of contemporary leftist political philosophy on the immanence and dynamism of thought.

Moreover, in place of explicit positive descriptions of communism from the early works of Marx and Engels, which quickly disappeared, there are hidden ways of utopian thinking. First, a *radical demand* is a demand that, along a chain of logical relationships, entails the reorganization of the entire social world in its fulfillment, which is the *differentia specifica* of utopian criticism from a functional point of view. For the “young” Marx, it is the demand for the abolition of religion. For the “mature” Marx, it is the abolition of surplus labor time. The ontological instance of this demand is *absolute negativity*, that is a social group, in its existence expressing all forms of need, which in principle cannot be satisfied in the given configuration of social existence. Second, *the inherent value of the community*, which, by the very practice of its association and coexistence for the sake of reorganizing the status quo, transcends this status quo, regardless of the formal achievement of the stated goal.

Thus, workers cooperating for the sake of their emancipation in the process of this cooperation cease to be for each other personifications of the real abstraction of labor, which, among other things, is the goal of communist political action.

The third chapter reveals a set of conflicts around the concept of utopia among the theorists of the Frankfurt School, the leading direction of Western Marxism. By the middle of the 20th century, they faced a combination of the historical *evitability* of communism after the collapse of Marx's law of “the absolute impoverishment of the proletariat”, the social *totality* of the criticized status quo and the philosophical *immanence* of their own critical point of view regarding this status quo. The recognition of such a position, extremely difficult for utopian thinking, leads to one of three possible attitudes (probably not the only ones, but those that actually manifested themselves in the philosophy and biographies of the “Frankfurters”).

First is the position of negative pure criticism (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno), i.e. criticism, which, unlike Kant's, still claims to be a normative condemnation and denial of the status quo, but no longer seeks to develop a political alternative or a program of political action to restructure it. Second is the position of utopianism (Herbert Marcuse) that persists, although not called utopianism, in spite of the theorist's own problematic ontological position; a utopianism, which manifests itself in the readiness to “make a bet”, that is, to perform political action for the sake of the utopian promise of a good life given the non-guaranteed success of the latter. Third is the position of messianic active expectation (Walter Benjamin), representing the political strategy of non-action and normative pathos, which is “parallel” to utopianism, since the radical openness of the horizon of messianic thinking, on the one hand, cannot be reduced to any specific political project (the *sine qua non* for utopia), and on the other hand, it makes it possible to keep the horizon of the future open in the face of the victorious hegemony and, thus, at the same time maintain hope for a qualitative transformation and see the threat of such from antagonistic political forces.

In conclusion, the conceptualization of utopia developed in the course of this study is summarized as an *unguaranteed, but binding promise of a good life*, impossible in the present for fundamental, but concrete historical reasons, and therefore functionally “undermines” this concrete historical status quo.