"Dream a little, dream of me", or an argument for the survival of political utopias.

Borie-Bioulès, Clara Lise Mathilde

Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

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Clara Lise Mathilde Borie-Bioulès

s3177947

Supervisor: Dr. Matthew B. Longo

Second reader: Dr. Paul Nieuwenburg

Les Saltimbanques

Dans la plaine les baladins
S'éloignent au long des jardins
Devant l'huis des auberges grises
Par les villages sans églises.

Et les enfants s'en vont devant
Les autres suivent en rêvant
Chaque arbre fruitier se résigne
Quand de très loin ils lui font signe.

Ils ont des poids ronds ou carrés
Des tambours des cerceaux dorés
L'ours et le singe, animaux sages
Quête des sous sur leur passage.

Guillaume Apollinaire, *Alcools,* 1913

The acrobats[1]

In the plain the balladeers
Move away along the gardens
Before the doors of gray inns
Through churchless villages.

And the children go ahead
The others follow, dreaming
Each fruit tree resigns itself
When they beckon from afar.

They have round or square weights
Drums and golden hoops
The bear and the monkey, wise animals
They beg for pennies as they go.

Guillaume Apollinaire, *Alcools,* 1913

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[1] All the translations of this thesis are by the author.

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Introduction

From 2009 to 2018, the French village of Notre-Dame-des-Landes and its surroundings were home to one of the most utopian projects of the 21st century. On a surface of 1650 hectares of land, a self-governed and self-sufficient society was created by local inhabitants, farmers, ecological and alter-globalization activists among others, living together outside of the capitalist system (ZAD, n.d.). Originally created as a response to an airport project, the occupation of Notre-Dame-des-Landes gained popularity by its scale and importance, but also by its unique organization, dependent on its members. Referred to as a "*Zone à défendre*"[2] (ZAD), the militant occupation of a space out of protest for the development of a project, the story around Notre-Dame-des-Landes implied the realization of a common ideal, of shared beliefs centered around the protection of the environment and doing it justice (Legrand & Goosz, 2014). The inhabitants, the "zadistes", lived as an "*intentional community*", a group existing under shared values and ideologies, and acting in accordance with it (Sargent, 1994). By adding up all of these characteristics, the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes became the enactment of a political utopia, and thus, the enactment of a dream.

Whether it is through literary imagination or real-life practice, political utopias are a pillar to the human imagination of what "could be". From the imaginary island of Sir Thomas More (1516) in *Utopia* to creating social change, utopias vary in roles and functions. For the sake of this thesis, we understand political utopia as a response to a need around socio-political matters, a desire expressed by society at a certain point given in time (Kumar, 2010, p. 550). Utopia is a core aspect of human thinking, whether it is to escape, critique, or change the world, and its mere existence can have important consequences on the state of the world (Levitas, 2001; Fernando et al., 2018). However, despite this key place and due to our current system, characterized by uniformity, political utopias come to a near-death, and are threatened by the loss of hope we put into them (Levitas, 2001; Kumar, 2010). The social, where boundaries between the private and the public are blurred, has impacted the way we perceive reality and the future ahead (Arendt, 1958/2018, pp. 38-50). Not only have we lost hope in what society may achieve, we have also lost belief in it and its legitimacy (Levitas, 2001, p. 34).

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[2] English: "*zone to defend*".

Despite this negative standpoint, we wonder whether an alternative is possible, and if utopia can still somehow exist in contemporary society. Thus, this thesis answers the following question: *Can political utopias still exist in the contemporary context of a uniform and conditioned society?*

As contradictory as it may sound, Hannah Arendt is used as an optimistic arguer for political utopias throughout this thesis. Aiming at arguing for the survival of political utopias, this thesis takes Arendt's (1958/2018) *The Human Condition* as a reference for its argument. Arendt argues for the importance and primordial role of politics in human relationships. It is not about content whatsoever, but about its place in contemporary society, its key location between political beings, and its determining role for the state of the world. Arguing for the prevalence of plurality in human relationships, Arendt's work displays the need for sustaining the public realm and the *polis* in the stage of society we live in.

By providing a reading of the tools of the *polis* as an opportunity structure, we argue for a way out of the dead-end utopia is stuck in. In the ethnocentric system we live in, stepping out of our frame of thought is crucial to understand human nature better, along with what it is able to achieve. Researching the potentiality and, in some cases, the practical realization of alternative societies enables us to look further than the established system, and to evaluate the political relevance of doing so. By making use of an example such as Notre-Dame-des-Landes, a large-scale reevaluation of norms and assumptions of modern-day society, we delve into the real-life attempt to rebirth utopia, to refine the codes of politics, and to transform imagination of a better life in real-life conditions. If political utopias are so important to the world, it is crucial to study them and to advocate for their survival.

In order to reach our goal, this thesis follows a specific layout. First off, we dive into the literature of political utopias, by analyzing the different approaches regarding the case of utopia in contemporary society. This section enables us to get an overview of the debates existing in utopian literature, both positive and negative positions regarding utopia in the modern-day context. Furthermore, we dive into an extended reading of Arendt's work on the social and on the *polis*. We identify the social as the problem, due to its uniformity and conditionality, and of the *polis* as its solution, highlighting the importance of human plurality, self-initiation and boundlessness of action. In order to make our argument more tangible, the example of the

utopian ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is used as a referral application case. Lastly, we discuss the limitations of our reading of Arendt, including the different functions which may be given to utopia, the sustainability of utopia in time, and tensions in our argument.

Literature review

To understand where political utopias stand today, it is necessary to dive into the debates which revolve around it. If some argue that utopias may still exist in some contexts, others argue that society has reached a dead-end in which utopia became impossible. The following literature review provides an extensive overview of the stage and challenges faced by political utopias in contemporary society. First, we focus on understanding the positive and hopeful approach to the future of utopia. What is argued here is the indispensability of utopia in human life, and the political matters it entails. Furthermore, we dive into the negative approach to the future of political utopias, characterized by highlights on postmodernity and late-stage capitalism. We argue that the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of a uniform economic system has decreased the space for utopian thinking, if not killed it.

I - Can utopia exist today…

Whether political utopias can still exist in the context of a uniformed and conditioned society is an ongoing debate, with different approaches to the same question. The following section overviews authors who have positively argued for the survival of utopia in contemporary society. We argue the essential feature of utopia, along with its encompassing character, arguing that anything can be a utopia as long as it is about changing the current system for the "better"[3].

If the condition of political utopias in contemporary society can be debated, one feature of it which is regularly highlighted is its essentiality. As argued by Sargent (2006), utopia is a central piece to human life, and therefore, to human relationships. It is ever going, and is sustained in time, as it is a core aspect of the "human experience". Despite the fact that, in practice, danger may arise from it, utopia enables one to capture hope and desire for a better life (p. 11). Sargent argues that the matter of utopia is not to reach "perfect" life conditions, but to express the

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[3] We use "better" in quotation marks as values behind it differ between groups.

identification of a problem with the current state of the world, and to propose alternatives (pp. 12-13). By understanding utopia as such, many different social or political organizations of our times can be understood as utopias. For instance, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas or Islamic extremism do not share any values or ideologies but share the goal to change the current system in order to attain what they consider as ideal. Thus, the utopian individual engages with a common human process, which does not focus on a specific idea or value, but on the expression of dissatisfaction and the usage of imagination to resolve it. What is argued is that utopia exists as soon as one is engaging in this process of problem-identification and problem-solving, through the imagination of better life conditions (Sargent, 2006, p. 11). Davis (1981) argues that "The utopian is more 'realistic' or tough-minded in that he accepts the basic problem as it is: limited satisfactions exposed to unlimited wants." (p. 37). Being given this realistic quality, the utopian individual is able to courageously identify and critique an issue in the current reality, and to engage in the imagination of a better alternative.

Similarly, Bouchet (2022) argues that utopias can be a form of "anti-fatalism", in the sense that engaging into utopian thinking is the simple refusal of a predetermined system. It is about refusing the TINA assumption, "there is no alternative", and arguing for different paths (p. 8). In that sense, Bouchet argues that, despite not calling themselves as such, many modern-day projects possess this utopian feature. He mentions the French examples of the Yellow Vests movements and the case of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, which share the emergence of a project or organization at the crossroads between politics, the social, and poetry (pp. 10-11). What is emphasized is the attempt to understand what does not work in the current system by observing it, and based on this, to "Dream, but with open eyes." (Bouchet, 2022, p. 10). Therefore, utopia exists out of observation and protestation. It is about the process of transforming reality by making use of imagination, dreams and poetry, in order to make existence more enjoyable, or at least better than the current reality. This process can be understood as such: "We can call a poem the transformation of a form of life by a form of language and reciprocally, inseparably, the transformation of a form of language by a form of life." (Meschonnic, as cited in Bouchet, 2022, p. 11). What is highlighted here is the fact that utopia does not have to be complete or stable to exist. The only requirement for a utopia to be considered as such is the desire, the effort and the process of transforming the current system

into an alternative one. The focus is not on the end product, but on the process and the work towards it (Bouchet, 2022, pp. 10-11).

If the characteristics mentioned above are sole conditions for utopia to exist, many projects may be considered as such. Among them are intentional communities, small-scale social organizations of people following certain values or ideas, defining codes of action and behavior inside of the community (Grinde et al., 2018, p. 626). By experimenting a different lifestyle with an alternative organization between its members, intentional communities may be considered as part of a social movement, but also as utopias, since different values from the traditional ones are put on a pedestal (Schehr, 1997, p. 174). As aforementioned, what matters is the identification of the current system as failing, and the "awakened dream" of an alternative (Bouchet, 2022, p. 10). For some, the existence of these communities is perceived as necessary, as it ensures common efforts towards diversity of definitions of what the "good life" is, with no specific group imposing their perception of it over others (Sargent, 2006, p. 15). Essentially, utopias are considered as such the moment they criticize reality and propose a solution to it. Whether it is through discussing and critiquing or through acting and changing, political utopias can be understood as persisting in the context of a uniformed and conditioned society, because they identify and work towards solving the problem.

II - …Or is it coming to an end?

Despite some arguing for the indispensable and permanent feature of utopia, other recent literature tackles the issue of utopia coming to an end and losing its political relevance. The following section tackles this negative approach to the current state of political utopias, focusing on the historical and economic contexts which may support this claim. We identify the fall of the Soviet Union and the defeat of the communist utopia, the rise of postmodernity along with the predominance of dystopia in media production as causes for the death of utopias in modern-day society.

If there is one historical event which has disturbed the place of utopia in the contemporary socio-political context, it is the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, entailing the decline of the "Communist utopia". As studied by Jacoby (1999) in *The End of Utopia*, a analogy between "utopia" and "communism", and between "communism" and "fascism" was established in

Western media, supporting the idea that utopia was something dreadful and to be feared, tied with the Soviet Union. The rise of such generalizing discourses encouraged the decrease in importance of utopia as an ideological standpoint. Being deeply tied with socialism in the public opinion, leftist politics were looked down upon in the context of the expansion of the capitalist system worldwide (Jameson, 2005, xii). Jameson (2005) writes the following about the inherent link between political utopianism and the Left in post-Soviet context:

> What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief (…) that the historical alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. The Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical different, radical otherness, and on the systematic nature if the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet. (Jameson, as cited in Kumar, 2010, p. 552).

Here, what differentiates the post-Soviet Left from the rest is its "radical otherness". The aim is to put the emphasis on uniqueness, and the idea that the Left is so different from everything else because it still responds to a general utopian perception of the world (Jameson, 2005, xii). However, as aforementioned, trust and support for utopian politics decreased due to fearful discourses about the Soviet Union, and the elevation of the West as the ideological "winner", through the expansion of capitalism and liberal democracy. After the fall of the Soviet Union, it was the West which was utopic, as it was at the origin of the systems which were spreading worldwide (Kumar, 2010, pp. 557-559). The prevalence of this system has also encouraged utopia's decrease in importance, in the sense that there is a lack of conditions in the Western world for utopia to exist. If the capitalist system is so widespread, it is because it is theoretically made to respond to all needs, therefore not leaving space for something for utopia to correct (Coates, 2016).

On top of the demonization of utopia in the post-Soviet world, one factor which has motivated the near-death of utopia is the late stage of capitalism we live in, namely postmodernity. To have a clearer idea of what this means, Levitas (2001) writes the following:

> The term 'postmodernity' can be used to refer to structural change in the nature of the society we live in, or a broader cultural, political and theoretical condition which results from this structural change, or a narrower artistic or aesthetic movement more properly termed 'postmodernism', or any combination of these. (Levitas, 2001, p. 32).

Essentially, this stage of capitalism represents the continuation and the intensification of modernism. Similarly to post-Soviet society, postmodernism is not a supporter but rather an enemy to traditional utopias. Levitas (2001) argues that utopias tend to be based and written on the universal values of the post-Enlightenment and on reason, which are disregarded by postmodernity (p. 32). Connecting with the previously mentioned analogy made between "utopia" and "communism", and therefore ideas of totalitarianism, universal values are more looked down upon rather than supported in the postmodernist era (Jacoby, 1999; Levitas, 2001, p. 32). On the contrary, the focus of what is left from utopia shifted on the individual, namely the personal rather than the general. Utopia became a projection not of the body politic but of the body itself (Sibers, 1994, p. 152). For Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) famous *Anti-Œdipus*, utopian thinking is deeply personal, and inherently linked with personal and bodily needs and desires.

If the political and economic environment of contemporary society is not supportive of utopia, it also impacts more general perceptions of it, such as in its fictive forms. Levitas (2001) argues that popular culture has known a shift from utopia to dystopia, and that we are nowadays much more bound to imagining a dreadful future rather than a hopeful one. We have lost interest in the future due to the loss of hope in society, with a defense of resistance and survival of the self rather than transformation and redemption of the whole (p. 29). Following this pessimist tendency, the utopian fictions have also greatly decreased, with an overdominance of apocalyptic and dystopian approaches to the future. Such a trend, characterized by the paucity of utopia and the rise of dystopia, makes our imagination of the future much darker, and harder

for us to conceptualize a positive and hopeful future (Kumar, 2010, pp. 553-554; Coates, 2016). Representing the antagonization of our society regarding the future, Levitas (2001) writes the following: "There is not just a loss of hope in the social, but a loss of belief in it." (p. 34).

As a consequence of this pessimism, we are left wondering whether utopia has a future, or if it is doomed to come to an end. Would it be too hopeful, too utopic (which would be ironic), to imagine a hopeful future for political utopias? There is no clear answer, and it seems impossible to find one which encompasses all the challenges faced by utopia. One way to look at this is to fall into the pessimistic discourse, to let ourselves be convinced that there is no way out of the system, and that imagining an improvement would be a waste of time and effort. However, another way to do so is to look further, towards more tangible answers, outside of the necessary and poetic discourses of utopia. In the contemporary conditioned system, it is key to identify other approaches to the death of utopia. By proposing a new reading of utopia, we wish to identify fruitful tools to regain hope into it, and to reclaim it from the harms of the social.

Argument

If we want to hold on hope and ensure the survival of utopia, it is key to identify the right tools to do so. In the following section, we perceive the Arendtian arguments on the *polis* as a way to argue for the future of utopia, making use of the right tools to protect and sustain it. By reclaiming human interaction from the "social" and attempting to relocate it to new spaces, political utopias appear as a solution to the homogenized system, and as a tool for better life conditions. The body of this thesis reads into the work of Arendt (1958/2018) on the social and the polis in *The Human Condition,* studying them as a problem and its solution. Arguing for the survival of political utopias in a context of social predominance, the aim is to read the polis as a tool where new, safer spaces for utopia can be reclaimed, with the capacity of facing the dangers of the social.

To argue in favor of the survival of political utopias in the conditioned and uniform current context, we first dive into an extended definition of what is exactly meant by the Arendtian "social" and by the "*polis*". Furthermore, we identify the "social" as the problem for the near-death of political utopias in modern day society, showcasing issues of uniformization and shrinking spaces for alternatives. We depict the *polis* as the solution for this issue, by highlighting features of human plurality, individuality and freedom, and how these may give a

second chance to utopias. By applying the promise of the utopian *polis* to the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, we wish to work in tandem between the *polis*, utopia and the selected case to provide a broader picture of what political utopias may look like in practice, when using the right tools to exist.

Defining the social and the polis

To understand the ongoing debate and the argument supported later, it is key to provide substantive term definitions. The following section gives an extended definition of the Arendtian social, and of the *polis.*

Perceived as the newer step of human relationships, the "social" is defined by Arendt as the stage of conditionality, uniformity and expectations. It is the time in which everything is condemned to follow one specific path rather than diverse ones. The era of the social, in which contemporary society is rooted into, is characterized by the prevalence of behavior over action, namely the expectation of certain conditioned social etiquettes over independent and unique action (1958/2018, pp. 40-43). One is not expected to act according to their own beliefs, but to the ones of the majority. Human relations in the public realm, namely the realm of politics and social interaction, are defined by some sort of normality, where all members are expected to act in a certain way not to be considered "abnormal". Leading to the rise of a uniform society, the diversity and uniqueness of all members of society have been encompassed into one single group. This homogenization of society has created the elevation of the rule of the majority, defining standards of morals and behaviors, and establishing overreaching judgments based on what the group believes. This way, the social encompasses all in the same way, and does not account for personal uniqueness or differences of self or opinion (p. 41). What prevails over human plurality, namely the multiplicity of singular uniqueness of human beings, is the expected behavior one should account for. In this system, one is not valued for their individuality, but for their ability to morph into the group, and to follow the latter in terms of opinion and behavior (pp. 40-43).

The other side of the coin, the *polis*, describes a much different public realm. The *polis* characterizes itself by being a space predominated by the equality of its members. This equality is characterized by the fact that the members of the *polis* have all stepped out of the household

to enter a free space of speech and action. According to Antique practices, the members of the *polis* share equal courage in crossing the boundaries of the private realm to enter in the political sphere. By doing so, they enter a space where they do not rule others or even themselves. The space for politics is about the equality of all, and the dedication to speech and action (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 32). To enter this space of freedom, participants are expected to have left behind all the necessities of the household, namely of the private, and to have controlled the necessities of their lives. This is a condition to enter the realm of the *polis*, testifying of one's courage to risk the comfort of their life by using speech and action (pp. 31-32; p. 36). This courage is considered as deeply political, because it is bringing to the fore the idea that the *polis* is the further step of human life, the attainment of the "good life". The latter is specified by the access to the "highest stage" of human life, namely the usage of speech and action in a tangible and valuable way (p. 37). The *polis* is not a geographical place, but rather a permanent idea which can be sustained continuously as long as political beings are present to do so. It is not located in space but within human beings, who make use of speech and action in the public realm, thus being perceived by others and becoming part of reality (pp. 198-199). Emphasizing the persistent existence of the *polis*, Arendt writes: "Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*." (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 198). This is where the *polis* becomes relevant: if others are present to see and perceive speech and action, the latter can become part of reality (p. 199). Without human plurality, any activity within the *polis* would not be politically relevant and would not affect social organization nor the world (pp. 198-199).

The problem: the social

If the social and the *polis* exist independently, they also interact. The following section of the argument discusses the perception of the social as the dead-end in which political utopias are stuck in. By assessing the dynamics existing between the social and the *polis*, we wish to identify the ongoing processes which seem to stop political utopias from developing in the social. We tackle the blurred lines between the private and the public, how it affects human relations, along with the negative consequences of societal homogenization.

The *polis* is what the public realm used to be defined by; it was the step out of the household, with public equality in usages of speech and action and, therefore, participation into reality (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 37). However, nowadays, the *polis* has lost its relevance to be overruled

by the social. With the rise of a conditioned and uniformized society, the location of human things and relationships has become much harder to define, caught somewhere between the private and the public realm. The boundaries between what belongs to the household and what belongs to the public sphere are blurred, affecting the way political beings act. Arendt argues this dynamic has led to "collective housekeeping", namely the application of the rules of the household to society. By doing so, similar hierarchies and mechanisms are followed, and it becomes harder to locate things in a specific realm (pp. 28-29). Society is treated as one big family, in which differences between individual beings are blended and homogenized in one single group (p. 41). With the growth of population, the uniformization of behaviors over singular uniqueness becomes more prominent, encompassing more and more social groups under one same unit. In this context, the individuality of each political being is not taken into account, nor is their singular opinion or perception of the world. This has created an environment in which one general idea is dominating over others and shrinking the space for plurality. But if everything is uniformized, can there be any space for alternatives?

Arendt argues that social predominance has led to majority rule. She describes it as a place where judgments of what is good and what is wrong solely depend on the opinion of the majority, rather than the diversity of opinions offered by human uniqueness. The bigger the social gets, the more people are inclined to follow its rules and expectations in order not to be disregarded as "non-behaving" (1958/2018, p. 43). This way, any behavior which does not fall according to normality is perceived as weird, or even deviant. This leaves no space for difference or alternatives, and therefore none for political utopias. If everything has to be the same, or at least to fall under the same overarching ideas, the thought of an alternative system will directly be disregarded as unserious or undoable.

Despite its key role, the *polis* has been disregarded for the social to predominate human relationships, therefore limiting opportunities for uniqueness of behavior and opinion. It is not so much about the content of these, but rather its diverse features, which enhance the condition of plurality in human relationships and therefore guarantee reality (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 176). However, the stage of society we live in is deeply rooted in the social: all human relationships are conditioned over certain values and mechanisms, such as capitalism and globalization, and anything differing from it is disregarded (Senker, 2011). In a system of social prevalence, the

space for the imagination of idealized life conditions is shrunk like never before, if not disappearing.

The solution: the polis

Despite the pessimism of the social, there is always light at the end of the tunnel, and hope for utopia. The following section focuses on the allocation of new spaces for utopia through the *polis*. By making use of the *polis* and the tools that arise from it, we argue for the survival of political utopias in the context of a uniform and conditioned society. Whether it is human plurality, self-initiation or the freedom and boundlessness of action, different characteristics of the *polis* are studied to support the case of political utopias. By using the case of the *zone à défendre* of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, we aim to work in a tandem between political utopias, the *polis* and a real-life example, to understand how the tools of the *polis* can support the survival of political utopias.

The polis and human plurality

If the *polis* can be understood as a tool to support political utopias, it cannot do so without action. To become tangible, speech and action depend on human plurality; it is this feature which supports the tangibility of action, and therefore, the relevance of utopian thinking in the *polis* (Arendt, 1958/2018, pp. 198-199). Speech and action cannot be relevant if enacted in the private realm; it is the perception and the interpretation of fellow political beings which gives value and existence to them (p. 199). If something only becomes part of reality once it is seen and perceived by others, it is human plurality which enables change and engagement. This feature gives the capacity of change to the *polis* and, therefore, transforming it into a space for engagement in utopian thinking. Having mere utopian thoughts cannot have any impact or consequence if kept in the private; in this case, it is just daydreaming.

However, this is not enough for utopian thinking to become politically relevant; if taking action is core to human life and dependent on human plurality to exist, utopian thinking is only relevant when being seen and perceived by others. This implies that, without the existence of the *polis,* utopian thought cannot materialize. The *polis*, inherent to the public realm, is a place for human plurality, equality, and for the "good life" (p. 37). It is there that utopian thinking is given a space to exist in, namely where it is perceived by others, and therefore, becomes relevant for the world.

The polis and self-initiation

Despite relying on the *polis* to exist, Arendt argues that action is something inherently personal and self-initiated. This feature can support the case of political utopia, in the sense that action is self-initiated by the "doer", namely the one engaging towards a certain ideal, despite the codes of the social (1958/2018, pp. 177).

Regardless of action being influenced and encouraged by the predictions of the social, the freedom to act and to make certain use of speech and action solely exists based on one's decision to do so. The social may influence how one utilizes speech and action, but *doing it* is inherent to the *polis*, the place for individuality and human uniqueness (p. 177; p. 49). It is this individual condition which makes the "doer" of the action a beginner, in the sense that they are the one at the origin of action and of its consequences (p. 177). If action is a form of unique engagement and consequence on the human world, it is a way of accessing the freedom of partaking into new, unique utopian thinking and, therefore, of reliving utopias. We base this argument on the self-initiative character of action, and the fact that, despite being influenced by it, it is not defined by others nor society. If engagement with the world is individual, it allows for utopian thinking without the limits imposed by the expectations of social. The uniform feature of the latter shrinks the space for alternatives, limiting opportunities for imagination and idealization of life (p. 41).

The polis and the boundless feature of action

To perceive the *polis* as a space for utopian opportunity, we may make use of yet another of its characteristics: its boundless feature. By being perceived as a space for freedom and equality of all, the *polis* is considered as the place of all possibles. This feature enhances the idea that the *polis* is a space which the social cannot entrench, and where speech and action can circulate without being interrupted by the codes of society (Arendt, 1958/2018, pp. 190-199).

As aforementioned, Antique societies believed that the *polis* enabled political beings to reach the "good life", namely life after stepping out of the household (p. 37). If the Greeks separated the art of lawmaking and of acting the law, it was to elevate the *polis* as a space for change and opportunity, where one could bring in their inner desires about the world and use speech and action in whichever way. The *polis* was understood as a limitless space, and where imagination can become tangible under the form of speech and action. Taking into account the

prevailing feature of the *polis*, namely the fact that it can exist only when political beings are present to sustain it, the latter may be seen as a place for the imagination of better life conditions and utopian thinking (pp. 194-199). If this space exists out of the limits of the social, there is no idea or value which hinders utopian thinking.

The *polis* is a boundless space, where the "doer" of an action has no control on its consequences or limits. This boundlessness causes action to be deeply unpredictable and uncontrollable, causing chain reactions, where its reverberations may affect multiple people, places, times etc. (pp. 190-191). It is the *polis* which ensures this function of action, in a space where all are given an opportunity to create and interact with it. We understand this as yet another argument for the utopian feature of the *polis*, as it does not limit speech and action to a certain few, but is accessible to all in the public realm. The *polis* is limitless space, in which all may happen.

The polis and Notre-Dame-des-Landes: a real-life utopia?

To understand whether tools of the *polis* can be used to support the existence of political utopias in practice, we use the case of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes. The following section reads this case through the utopian Arendtian lens, applying the tools of the *polis* to this project, and highlighting the political relevance of it. First off, we discuss the overall project of the ZAD, before diving into the features of human plurality, self-initiation and the boundlessness of action. We argue that the tools of the Arendtian *polis* help us understand the political value of utopia, therefore supporting its survival.

The project behind the ZAD, whether it is imaginative or political, is about creating a space for idealized life conditions. The zadistes refer to their occupation as an *"utopie réelle"*[4], translating the attempt to create a new space in contradiction with the social, and making use of all the tools of the *polis* to exist (Leprince, 2018). Among the values defended by the members are environmentalism, self-governance, self-subsistence, and anti-authoritarianism, greatly differing from what the traditional system offers (Mouillard, 2012). By handling the opportunities offered by the *polis* and by actively acting for a different reality, the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is the epitome of utopia in the context of social predominance. The occupation teaches us that the *polis* may be used as a tool to overcome the predominance of the

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[4] English: *real utopia.*

social, and to reclaim a space for alternative social organization. First off, we tackle the value of human plurality, before diving into the self-initiative character of the project, along with the boundless feature of action in Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

If the ZAD could exist, it is because it was a project idealized and shared by a multitude of people. If the collective *Les habitant.e.s qui résistent*[5] had not shared with others the idea of occupying the land and of creating a new space based on certain values, the utopian project behind the ZAD would have never existed. In their "call for immigration", the collective invited for the creation of an autonomous space, following an anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian logic (Verdier, 2022). What drove the project is the expression of the desire to improve life conditions with other political beings; if it had not been brought up to the public by the collective, therefore to human plurality, it would have never existed. By sharing their dissatisfaction with the current system, the members of the ZAD engaged with critiquing reality and identifying a problem in the latter, using it as a motor for utopia. In this case, the issues identified were the capitalist, centralized and authoritarian features of the system, with the desire of attaining better life conditions outside of these values and under a new, alternative social organization (Giniaux et al., 2023). This demonstrates the fact that, without the inherent human plurality of the *polis*, speech and action have no meaning, and thus, utopian thinking has no tangible or "real" feature. This tool of the *polis* enabled Notre-Dame-des-Landes to be a utopian space, as it is fighting off the uniform assumption of the social; it is where the highest human activity, action, takes form (Arendt, 1958/2018, pp. 198-199).

To exist as a utopian project outside of the predominant social, the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes made use of the self-initiative and self-decisive character of its members: the zadistes took the individual decision to live outside of the social. Differing from the expectations of the uniform social, namely the capitalist and hierarchical society, the members of the ZAD seized the freedom offered by the *polis* to live in an alternative system. By following their convictions rather than society's, the inhabitants of Notre-Dame-des-Landes engaged in unique and unforeseen utopian-thinking, creating a living space based on their singular idea of what "better life conditions" could be (Pruvost, 2017). This enhances the idea that the social is at the origin of the stagnant position of political utopias, because it erases all opportunity for alternatives

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[5] English: *the resisting inhabitants*.

through the imposition of a dominant system with the predation of certain ideas over others (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 45; Bouchet, 2022, p. 8). Utopian thinking is, in the case of the ZAD, used as a tinder for alternatives and actions for change based on the self-volunteering of its members.

To establish itself as a utopia, the ZAD put forward the desires of a switch in overarching values and of social organization. It is by stepping into the *polis*, the space of equal possibilities, that these desires could be perceived by others, and therefore become tangible. The achievement, or at least the expression of the ideal of the zadistes, was motivated and supported by the opportunity structure offered by the *polis*. The project of the ZAD could have never existed without the creation of a new *polis* by its members, outside of the dreaded social, and in which an independent space for the "good life" was organized. It could only exist because other people were there to perceive and work towards the utopian project, with the creation of open spaces for speech and action, where no overarching rule or ideas could limit possibilities. This translates the idea that utopia does not need a perfect world to be looked at or attempted, but simply the correct structure. It is the *polis* which ensures the space and the freedom to do so, challenging the homogenized judgments of the social.

Overall, the project of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is a utopian one in the sense that it aimed at proposing a completely different system, in which all the predominant values and judgments of the social were challenged. What is put forward is the courage to enter the political realm and to highlight human plurality and the diversity of ideas and opinions against the homogenization of the social. By making use of the tools of the *polis,* the zadistes were able to create a space with new codes of action and behavior, under a new social organization. The case of Notre-Dame-des-Landes showcases the fact that, despite a time of conditioned and uniformized social organization, utopian spaces are still prone to exist if the right tools are being used. What we can learn from it is not so much about the practice per se, but about the opportunity structures the *polis* may offer for utopian thinking and utopian projects.

Discussion and conclusion

If this thesis may argue for the survival of utopia in the current system, it is important to keep in mind some follow-up questions along with limitations which arise from our

argument. In this final section, we dive into the different functions utopia may take once actualized, in order to understand the political matter behind it once it has stepped out of mere theory. By assessing utopia as *compensation*, *critique* and *change*, we argue for the prevalence of utopia as *critique* and *change* for it to be politically relevant. Furthermore, we take a closer look at the limitations of our argument, tackling concerns on the longevity of utopia in time, along with raising questions about the tension between the social and utopia in our main argument.

Functions of utopia

The section below studies the three functions taken by utopia when being put in practice, *compensation*, *critique* and *change*. We apply these functions to the utopian features of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes we analyzed through Arendt's *polis* and discuss the political relevance of each. We argue for the prevalence of the *critique* and *change* functions over *compensation* in terms of political contributions to the value of utopia.

The first function of utopia is *compensation* (Levitas, 2001, p. 27). Here, reality is avoided, and the fantasy of the ideal is included in reality. The focus is on escapism and daydream of something better than reality (Fernando et al., p. 781). In this function, utopia is projecting times ahead in a hopeful way to escape the present (Levitas, 2001, p. 27). In the case of the ZAD, utopia as *compensation* would resume to the imagination of better life conditions. However, according to our reading of Arendt, this is not politically relevant, in the sense that it does not appear to other political beings and resumes itself to daydreaming. Utopia as *compensation* does not become tangible as it does not take part in the public realm and remains ultimately personal.

The second function of utopia is *critique*, namely the identification of a problem in reality motivating engagement with utopia. The issue comes from the real world, which is what the critique is trying to correct (Levitas, 2001, p. 27). The aim is to theorize, speculate and imagine what could be. Utopia as *critique* is trapped between a critique of the real world and a motor for change, translates dissatisfaction with the present, and the will to move further (Levitas, 2001, p. 27). In the utopia of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the *critique* function is highlighted by the engagement of the zadistes with the predominant societal values, identifying a problem, and proposing a utopian alternative. This function makes utopia tangible as it is

confronted to human plurality, where the critique of reality can be seen and perceived by others, and therefore, be given a political relevance.

Lastly is utopia as *change,* through which societal engagement catalyzes change in society (Levitas, 2001, p. 27). By directly engaging with social organization, *change* motivates efforts towards a reality closer to the ideal (Fernando et al., 2018, pp. 779-780). Utopia preludes socio-political engagement, as it aims at escaping, critiquing and disrupting existing structures (Levitas, 2010, pp. 38-40). Its existence is based on socio-political implications on the state of the world, and how it can be improved (pp. 26-27). Based on the Arendtian approach, we relate this function to the freedom of using speech and action in the public realm (Arendt, 1958/2018, pp. 190-199). By living in an alternative society, the zadistes embraced both *change* and action to create a politically relevant space, where the "better" could be enacted.

The three functions of utopia have different implications on the world. Both the functions of *critique* and *change* are directly in contact with human plurality and action. Here, we learn about what utopia may be used *for*, and how the tools of the *polis* can be used to feasibly support it. Whether it is to escape, critique or change reality, utopia is an instrument used to hopefully achieve an ideal.

Limitations

The following section tackles the limitations which our argument for the survival of utopia faces. We discuss the durability of utopia, reflecting on the violent repression of the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, before drawing questions on the imperishability of utopia. Furthermore, we tackle inherent tension in our argument, studying the relationship between the social and utopia. We identify a loophole, and account for further research.

Despite arguing for the survival of utopia, concerns on its durability remain. Can something as vague as an ideal be sustained in time? Utopia is something inherently personal, as the identification of the "better" solely depends on the individual (Sargent, 2006). In the social, we may wonder whether utopia can be given the opportunity to persist in the long-term. For the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the government initiated *Opération César*[6] of autumn 2012 violently destroyed the utopian attempt. By deploying armed forces, the ZAD was partly

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[6] English: *Cesar Operation.*

destroyed, and around 150 zadistes were expelled (Subra, 2017, pp. 14-15; Mullot, 2022). This violent end makes us wonder whether political utopias can be sustained in time, when it faces destruction, contempt and other stigmata. Despite some arguing for the necessity of violence to reach utopia, such as Marx and Engels (1848) in *The Communist Manifesto*, we wonder whether it applies to cases like the ZAD, where utopia only exists because people stepped out of the social to live their ideal. We are concerned with the fact that, because the utopia behind the ZAD was an alternative to society, the forces and institutions of the social backfired on it. By living alternatively, the zadistes were pursuing "non-behavior", namely stepping out of the codes established by the social, and being disregarded for doing so (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 43). If the punishment for acting differently is inevitable, can utopias persist in time? This is a concern we are left wondering, and to which the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes is a negative example of.

The second limitation we account for is the tension in our argument on the relation between the social and utopia. We state above that the rise of the social has killed utopia, as the uniformization of behavior and opinion shrunk the space for alternatives, but that the tools of the *polis* can counter the harms of the social and relive utopia. However, didn't the social kill the latter? This is a loophole in our argument, as it entails that the social can be corrected by what it destroys. We do not have a solution for this, as it implies studying the rise of the social, or creating a new language for utopia. Further research could account for the process and dynamics by which the social predominated human relationships. We wonder whether it was a conjuncture, a tipping point, or a cyclical process, and whether a reversal or structural changes could ever happen.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, we argued for the survival of political utopias in the context of a uniform and conditioned society. By providing an extensive definition of the Arendtian social and *polis*, studying the tools of the latter in detail, we discuss the second chance of political utopias to counter the uniformity of contemporary society. With the case of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, we discovered the political relevance of dreaming, the possibility of alternatives, and how imagination can become a catalyzer for change. This showed us that the mere fact that people gathering together can be enough for change to happen: whether it is through resisting, protesting or arguing for change, the people hold the power to escape the system they created.

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