



Call for papers – pluri-disciplinary conference in the social sciences

Feminist Utopias at Work Reorganise, Redefine, Abolish

6th – 7th Novembre 2025

University of Strasbourg, France

Keynote speaker: Prof. Jessica Gordon Nembhard (CUNY, New York City), author of *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2014).

Although feminist utopias have been the object of an important body of work, especially in the literary field, the specific paradigm of labour within these experiments and imaginaries has received only limited attention. **The purpose of this conference is to explore to what extent and in what ways labour (both as a site of oppression and emancipation) serves as a paradigm in feminist utopia-building. We will consider utopias both as theories and social experiments, specifically through the modes of reorganisation, redefinition and abolition.** In doing so, we wish to bring to the fore a “constellation” of breaches as a way of confronting, from feminist perspectives, the negative experience of labour under capitalism (Adorno, 1990).

Utopias in the sphere of labour and their political content, which has sedimented in critical theory on work, are imprinted by the Western patrimony of utopian socialism (Abensour, 2013ab, 2016abc; Buber, 2016; Engels, 2021; Lallement, 2009; Renault, 2016; Reichhart; 2019 Riot-Sarcey, 1998). Important figures such as Saint-Simon, Fourier or Owen aimed to bring together labour and ideals of emancipation. Their work revolved around a central question, phrased by Miguel Abensour as: “how to build association?” (2013a). Although utopian socialism has had radical, short-lived and often forgotten feminist influences (Taylor, 1993) as well as a matrimony now being highlighted (Fayolle & Matamoros, 2023; Lallement, 2019, 2022), political constructions of “what labour could become” remain shaped by these inherited “masters’ dreams” (Abensour, 2013a).

Feminist critiques have challenged androcentric definitions of labour, broadening the field to include alternative theoretical frameworks such as social reproduction theory (Arruzza, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2017; Brenner & Laslett, 1991; Ferguson, 2019; Glenn, 1992; Vogel, 2013) and care work (Gilligan, 1983; hooks, 2018; Molinier, 2020; Tronto, 2013). Other currents, and Black feminist theories especially, have decentered the predominantly white, middle- and upper-class perspectives on labour, highlighting systems of oppression such as forced labour (Davis, 2019; Glenn, 1992; Morgan, 2004) and North/South dynamics (Parreñas, 2015; Khader, 2019). Other scholars have brought attention to unrecognised forms of labour, such as emotional labour (Durr & Harvey Wingfield, 2011; Hochschild, 2012; Illouz, 2007), unpaid collective work (Banks, 2020; Simonet, 2018) and forms of work that remain illegitimized (for ex. porn work, Berg, 2021). Despite these critical claims, the historical development of capitalism – with its persistently gendered and racialized division of labour – can be considered as

dystopian – a “bad place” – that has led some feminist thinkers to reject the idea of equality in such a context (see for ex. Lonzi, 1974).

The conference will use utopia for its central function: “confronting the problem of power” through sidelining and introducing “a sense of doubt that shatters the obvious” (Ricoeur, 1986). While we firmly acknowledge the need for utopia in critical thinking (Stahl, 2023), we also underline the importance of multiple approaches to emancipatory politics as a compass for utopia-building (Allen, 2015). As a result, we will accept understandings of utopia both as a reflexive tool for critique and as a heuristic tool for transformation. Three complementary approaches to utopia-building can be considered: 1. reorganise labour; 2. redefine labour; 3. abolish labour.

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1. Reorganise labour

Feminist utopia-building has focused on developing alternative ways of organising labour, reconfiguring the relation between the individual and the collective. Criticising the patriarchal and capitalist model of reproductive labour that cuts ties between “lesbians and women-identified women”, Audre Lorde theorised a politics of “interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences”, allowing us to “return with true visions of our future” (2018). Other feminist scenarios encourage forms of cooperation and solidarity as alternative principles of social organisation, especially in the labour sphere, against individualism and competition (Cago, 2020; Federici, 2018; Harcourt, 2024; Mohanty, 2003; Salem, 2019).

Questions that arise include: what feminist utopian forms of labour re-organisation (including its negation) have been theorised or experimented to reconfigure social relations and values? To what extent do feminist utopian models of labour reorganisation redefine traditional gender roles and assignments? On what justifications have these discourses and/or experiments been contested? To what extent have they been developed at the expense of other social groups and/or led to the re-institutionalisation of power relations?

2. Redefine labour

Feminist critiques have subverted entrenched definitions of labour by proposing alternative moral values to those central to the capitalist system (Gilligan, 1983). In this respect, feminist utopias have imagined political configurations where social relations are governed by principles of nurturing, putting forward reproduction as a valued and central form of labour. Ethical perspectives of ecofeminism have depicted utopias where labour is recognized as a mutual activity to be carried out in harmony by humans, non-humans and nature (Cuomo, 1998). On the other hand, and in different frameworks, certain queer scholarships have contested the reproductive paradigm, including in the purpose of utopias as such (Muñoz, 2009).

Questions that arise include: in what ways have feminist utopias redefined labour and the frontiers that have been built by the capitalist value system: between work/leisure, private/public, free/waged, caring/utilitarian, human/non-human, dirty/clean rational/emotional...? To what extent can redefinitions of labour allow for collective emancipatory politics? How is the capitalist and androcentric labour order already confronted here and now in the multiple subversive redefinitions of labour developed in the daily exercise of work?

3. Abolish labour

Positing the end of work as a utopian horizon, Kathi Weeks argues against feminist currents that have implicitly encouraged a capitalist ethic of work (2011). Furthermore, 1970s feminist family abolitionism has been revisited, emphasizing how the institution of the family and reproductive labour is a central site for gender oppression and competition (Weeks, 2023; Lewis, 2022). Other proposals to reduce and redistribute reproductive labour have posited utopian post-work imaginaries especially through technology and the robotisation of the domestic sphere (Hester & Srnicek, 2023). For arguments against, see Fortunati, (2018). These feminist abolitionist imaginaries typically confront the dystopian

emergence of the trad-wife figure and its embodiment of gender divisions and stereotypes, or masculinist ideals of the value of work.

Questions that arise include: how have feminist utopias defined and justified the abolition of labour in its multiple forms? To what extent and in what ways have they proposed alternatives to the capitalist work ethic? Conversely, how have work-centred utopias forgotten or exacerbated struggles arising from the gender order?

The conference welcomes contributions in the social sciences and humanities (sociology, anthropology, critical theory, political and social theory, political science, philosophy etc.), whether on theory or experimental practices. Contributions will investigate the political content and implications of feminist utopias that rethink capitalist relations to labour understood broadly. We will also welcome contributions from a broader array of disciplines, including the literary, historical and economical fields.

Presentations can be given in English or in French.

About the conference

The conference is organised as part of the ERC Starting Grant project “WE-COOP” (2023-28). The conference will take place in person at the University of Strasbourg (France). There is no participation fee. Recognising the financial challenges some scholars face, we have set up a solidarity fund to support those without institutional resources to join the conference. Please contact Ada Reichhart for further information.

Publication

We are planning to publish the most relevant and developed papers as an open-access book on the theme of “Feminist Utopias at Work” with a renowned publisher.

Submission Guidelines

Please submit an abstract of max. 500 words mentioning your chosen theme (reorganise, redefine, abolish), your preferred language (English or French) and a brief biographical note to Ada Reichhart (wecooperc@gmail.com) with the subject line “Feminist utopias at work” by 1 June 2025. We will notify you of our decision by 1 July 2025.

For any questions regarding the call or the conference, please contact Ada Reichhart (wecooperc@gmail.com). For more information on the ERC StG WE-COOP project, please visit www.we-coop.eu

Scientific Committee

We are delighted to count among the members of the Scientific Committee:

Sylvaine Bulle, Professor of Sociology, EHESS (Paris, France)

Pascale Devette, Professor of Political Science, Université de Montréal (Montréal, Canada)

Maria Ines Fernandez Alvarez, Adjoint Professor in Social Anthropology, Universidad de Buenos Aires (Argentina)

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