The Journal of Social and Cultural Possibilities—A Triptych Introduction

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Will Bridges:

Imagine the world, in the words of James Baldwin, from "an angle odd indeed."[1] Imagine a rose of a slightly redder hue, a promenade in a park with a turn to the right rather than a turn to the left, a revolution with two fewer martyrs, a drink of water with fewer contaminants per million parts, federal reparations for American slavery, a deathbed surrounded by loved ones, a deathbed surrounded by no one, and a world in which humans are no longer born at all. These imaginings belong to the realm of the possible. The *Journal of Social and Cultural Possibilities* is an open invitation to research and write about these possibilities and beyond.

The possible is all that which is able to be. It is the spectrum of potentialities which could come (or could have come) to be but have yet to—or which may never—come into being. This is not a slight: the potency of the possible often resides in its germinal quality (sometimes the present is better in its gift-wrapped box).

The potency of the possible is worthy of study. It is more than worthy—it is, in the words of Hans Jonas, our ethical and epistemological responsibility. Our collective actions today have the potential to enable or foreclose the possibilities of tomorrow. Jonas suggests that we imagine these possibilities by way of "thought experiments," for

> it is the content, not the certainty of the "then" [of if-then arguments] thus offered in the imagination as possible which can bring to light, for the first time, principles…heretofore unknown for lack of the actual occasions to which they could apply and which would have called attention to them. The perceived possibility can now take the place of the actual occasion; and reflection on the possible, fully unfolded in the imagination, gives access to new…truth.[2]

The *Journal of Social and Cultural Possibilities* is a space where the scholarly imagination is free to unfold and the findings of thought experimentation (broadly conceived) are considered with all the epistemological esteem granted to the fruits of other forms of experimentation.

In *A Philosophy of the Possible*, Mikhail Epstein writes that, whereas the modality of the actual is binary—things either are or they are not—the modality of the possible presents us with "not a single choice, but a 'collection' of various possibilities which is, in principle, infinite."[3] In this view, it is not that the actual and the possible stand in binary opposition, for the actual can be seen as a special case of the possible (namely, the case in which the possible has been actualized). Rather, the possible exists both within and alongside the actual, an infinite set of spectral fluctuations, gestures toward how things might be otherwise. *Pace* the probable, the possible refers to this spectrum of potentialities in its plentitude. This journal cultivates the plentiful imagining of the otherwise.

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[1] Baldwin, James, *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 183.
[2] Jonas, Hans, *The Imperative of Responsibility*: *In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 29.
[3] Epstein, Mikhail, *A Philosophy of the Possible: Modalities in Thought and Culture* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2019), 147.

Now imagine yourself as a stone, or as that rose of a redder hue, or as an ant of the species *Formica incerta*. One stone becomes the tip of a spear, another is crushed and arrogated in an act of what Achille Mbembe calls brutalist destruction.[4] One rose is nipped in the bud, another finds its image duplicated in an impressionistic painting. One *Formica* searches for honeydew for its queen, another succumbs to pesticide or is enslaved by a *Polyergus lucidus*. This range of possibilities, from tip of the spear to enslaved ants, suggests that existence unfurls as the interplay of the actual and the possible.

Human being unfurls by way of a kind of alchemy, one which plays with this interplay of the actual and the possible. Take the *Formica incerta* as a counterexample: although some organisms act in anticipation of imminent possibilities, such actions are "choreographed,…rigid and inflexible preprogrammed responses to specific stimuli in the…environment."[5] When humans respond to possibilities with choreography and rigid preprogramming, we do so, as Jean-Paul Sartre reminds us, by choice or by force. Paul Ricoeur defines human being by way of its epistemology, deeming our being as one which exists in the mode of understanding being. Part of what this "understanding" entails is a realization that things are not simply what they are, but are the interplay of what they are and what they might become.

Imagine yourself now as the scholar of stone. To be sure, your scholarship of the stone will attend to the actualities of your object of inquiry. This very attention to its actualities, however, will invite you to imagine its possibilities—the tip of the spear, brutalist destruction, and so on—for the actual, as we noted earlier, is both a transformed instantiation of the possible, and is embedded and flanked with possibilities. And so even the study of stone, a material metaphorically synonymous with immutability (it's "written in stone"; you "can't squeeze any blood from it"), will begin to register, in the words of J. J. Cohen, "lithic possibilit[ies]" of the ways in which "stone offers a craggy, fissured, irregular surface full of possibilities for confederation."[6] In other words, even when the stone is the object of inquiry, the scholar has the *potential* to amplify (or, if they so choose, nullify) possibilities, to excavate and imagine all that which might come to be. In this regard, good scholarship is akin to good love: the scholar sees things not only for what they are, but also for that which they have the potential to be.

The emphasis here is on potential or, more accurately, potentiation. Potentiation is "*the multiplication of thinkabilities by creating alternatives, variations, and competing models*."[7] To potentiate an object of inquiry is to explore how it invites us to multiply our thinkabilities; it is to re-imagine the possible. It is the creation of alternative, variable, and competing models of what might come to be. It is to foreground the imaginative, provocative, and speculative possibilities inspired by the object in question.

What is true for the study of the stone is true for studies writ large; any academic field can potentiate its objects and subjects. Mathematicians, economists, and computer scientists turn to possibility theory as an alternative to probability for modeling the uncertainty of incomplete information. The field of education has advocates for the study of the possible ranging from Paulo Freire to Anna Craft.[8] Eric Hayot has recently proposed that the thinking of nonactualized

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[4] Mbembe, Achille, *Brutalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).
[5] La Fontaine, Jayar, *The Means to Reach Further: Foresight Biases and the Problem of Misfuturing*, (masters thesis, Ontario College of Art and Design, 2014), 36.
[6] Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 16, 60.
[7] Epstein, *A Philosophy of the Possible*, 223 (original emphasis).
[8] Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London, UK: Continuum, 2000); Craft, Anna, *Creativity, Education, and Society* (London, UK: Institute of Education Press, 2015).

possibility is a necessity of humanist reasoning.[9] In his call for a possibilities turn across the academic disciplines, Vlad Glăveanu notes that "all the disciplines that have an interest in anticipation, imagination, wonder, and creativity, among others, can contribute" to the creation and analysis of possibilities.[10]

Yes, the academic disciplines "can" contribute—it is a possibility. But do they? Let's reconsider our emphasis on potential and potentiation in a second register. The academic disciplines have the *potential* to propose expansions of the parameters of the possible. But do they make good on this promise; does academic scholarship potentiate to its full potential? Is possibilist scholarship invited, cultivated, incentivized, peer-reviewed, and recognized? And what of potentiation's cognitive neighbors—is there a place in academia for speculation, creation, daydreaming? Is potential tenurable? Of course, "academia" is too multifaceted to answer this question in anything other than shades of gray. There are pockets of potentiation throughout the academic endeavor: climatology calls for forecasts, finance involves speculation, political scientists have their predictive models, and so on. So too are the humanities and humanistic social sciences "frequently…imaginative, or provocative, or speculative."[11]

One would hope to be forgiven, however, if they had trouble hearing the "frequency" of the imagination, provocation, speculation, or potentiation in some works of contemporary scholarship. David Theo Goldberg contends that scholarly "rethinking[s of] the public sphere" have "been much better at critically assessing existing cultural expression…than [they] have been at promoting viable counter-conceptions." [12] Given, however, the dark possibilities of existential catastrophes on our sociocultural horizon—think here of wars both global and civil, cyberterrorism, pandemics, climate crises, famine, the collapse of democracies worldwide, algorithmic racism, the potential risks of advanced artificial intelligence, economic collapse and the inequitable distribution of resources, and any number of other existential challenges—there is a pressing need for scholarly explorations of sociocultural possibilities. There is a need, one which verges on an ethical obligation, for the coupling of critiques of that which is with viable counterconceptions of that which could be.

Let us clarify this ethical verge: "the purpose of ethics," Epstein writes, "can be defined as the broadening of the sphere of the possible.…There are people who make us feel open and unpredictable, ready to find in ourselves something unknown. A multitude of possible worlds open their doors, worlds in which we can be together.…Such people…are the best moralists: they have mastered the ethics of the possible."[13] For scholars to amass intellectual and methodological riches but refuse to equitably redistribute those resources toward the broadening of the parameters of the possible is arguably an ethical failure, particularly when this refusal is preceded by recognition and critique of the violence inherent in the construction of the parameters of the actual. Bertolt Brecht once wrote of how much attention is paid to the violence of a raging river and of how little attention is paid to the violence of the riverbanks that suppress it.[14] An epistemic ecosystem that errs on the side of actualism provides intellectual haven for the

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[9] Hayot, Eric, *Humanist Reason: A History. An Argument. A Plan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
[10] Glăveanu, Vlad, "The Possible as a Field of Inquiry." *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 14.3, 2018, 520.
[11] Small, Helen, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 26.
[12] Goldberg, David Theo, *The Afterlife of the Humanities* April 2014, 22–24, https://issuu.com/uchri/docs/afterlife (accessed 03/24/24).
[13] Epstein, *A Philosophy of the Possible*, 272.
[14] Brecht, Bertolt "On Violence," in *Bertolt Brecht: Poems, 1913–1956*, (New York: Methuen, 1976), 276.

violence of the riverbanks. If we see more sustainable ways the world and its beings might flow, we have an epistemological duty to say so.

The *Journal of Social and Cultural Possibilities* is a venue for the exploration of the possible. The *Journal* is also, however, open to more than the possible: it is a space for the critical exploration of social and cultural probabilities, preferabilities, potentialities, promises, proposals, impossibilities, visions, alternatives, speculations, and so on. In other words, the *Journal* seeks not only to chronicle the possibilities that appear before us, but also to expand the parameters of the possible through its engagement with diverse social and cultural phenomena. The *Journal* is interested in exploring how social and cultural practices can both produce and foreclose possibilities and pathways.

The *Journal*'s foundational premise is that humanistic and social inquiry can (and indeed should) expand our capacity to imagine otherwise. In other words, the *Journal* is interested in how these modes of inquiry and the habits of mind they cultivate might make us more forethoughtful—more attuned to what might come to be, more inventive in our interventions, more creative, more responsible to future generations, more visionary, more reflective on the long-term consequences of our actions, more decisive, and more conscious of the all-too-often underexamined assumptions, values, knowledge systems, and ways of seeing that shape how we imagine futures and build the futures we imagine. Humanistic and social inquiry—modes of inquiry best heard in dialogue rather than monologue—have the potential to function as an engine of social transformation; the *Journal* asks contributors to cultivate this transformative potential.

Social and cultural phenomena that project unjust or oppressive visions of the future, whether directly or tacitly, demand critique. Importantly, however, the *Journal* views critique not as an end-in-itself but as a foundation for exploring and developing alternative possibilities. "It seems to me," Ricoeur once wrote, "that critique can be neither the first instance nor the last."[15] We agree. Alongside the necessary work of critical analysis, then, the *Journal* also seeks to mine the social and cultural landscape for resources that may help us envision and build different, better, and more just futures. We are interested in *imaginative* resources: for example, we welcome work that focuses on the relationship between cultural or artistic phenomena and the imagining of possibilities. And we are also interested in *social* and *material* resources: that is, we welcome work that explores how futures are produced through social practices and processes, and in the context of organizations, movements, communities, and institutions.

The Journal of Social and Cultural Possibilities is transdisciplinary in outlook and has a broad understanding of the cognitive tools at our disposal: how, it asks, can possibilities be seen in or produced through a film, or a political action, or an art movement, or an ethnography, or a social experiment, or a response to a disaster, or an online community? Above all, the *Journal* invites contributors to imagine rigorously, robustly, carefully, and capaciously: we ask contributors to delineate possibilities and their implications with all the methodological and theoretical care we afford our studies of the actual.

Let us make explicit that which is implicit in the claim that the possible merits methodological and theoretical care. There are indeed more fruitful and less fruitful ways of thinking about the possible. Just as one can become a better thinker of probability, so too can we cultivate our capacity to think of possibilities. With Popper's Foresight Diamond in mind,[16] we

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[15] Ricoeur, Paul, *From Text to Action* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 304.

[16] See Popper, Rafael "Foresight Methodology," Luke Georghiou et al. (eds.), *The Handbook of Technology Foresight: Concepts and Practice* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009), 44-88.

should note that any number of intellectual facilities and habits of mind are required for the study of the possible. These intellectual skills include a hermeneutics of the possible, speculative and counterfactual reasoning, creativity, causal analysis, distal reasoning, theory of mind, systems thinking, ethical reasoning, an ability to imagine possible worlds, and an ability to help others see possible worlds more clearly. Moreover, there are any number of metrics by which to assess possibilistic reason: the better one is at thinking the possible, the wider the range of possibilities they can envision; good thinkers of the possible imagine possibilities that have yet to be imagined by others; possibilist thinking requires an ability to differentiate the equipossible from unevenly distributed possibilities, and so on. In a word, although thinking of possibilities is a central facet of the human condition, thinking about *how* we think about possibilities is a rarer phenomenon. Scholarly care can cultivate our capacity to both think of better possibilities and to think of possibilities better.

For the time being, we invite four kinds of contributions to the *Journal*. First, we publish peer-reviewed articles at the intersections of humanistic, social-scientific and possibilist thinking. Second, we also publish pieces to be reviewed by peers "post-publication." That is to say, we invite experimental, provocative or creative contributions (for example, manifestos, think pieces, autotheory, video essays, state-of-the-field essays, future-state-of-the-field essays) to be reviewed by the editorial board rather than undergo the peer review process. The formal and institutional conventions of academic publishing are not necessarily conducive of the imagining of the possible. So the *Journal* welcomes unconventional forms of scholarly discourse. Such experimental publications are, by design, germinal, and so they hold the power and potential peculiar to the germ. Third, because we have a keen interest in the democratization of futures studies and encourage our readers to hear the creation of possibilities as they are sounded by underrepresented voices, we invite proposals for carefully planned and thoroughly conceptualized guest-edited themed issues. Such contributions will democratize the *Journal*'s editorial epistemic community beyond its editorial collective, reflecting our belief that possibilities are sweeter when shared. Finally, the *Journal* always holds open a space for the unforeseen. Given the *Journal*'s orientation, it is only fitting that we anticipate the unanticipated and welcome ideas beyond the stated aims and scope of the *Journal* but germane to its ethos. It is precisely because the *Journal* is committed to the possible that it invites re-imaginings of its charge, re-imaginings which will be, in turn, always be open to amendment by the next generation of forward-thinking readers.

Elaine Scarry once wrote that the "verbal arts" can be seen as "at once counterfactual and counterfictional"—counterfactual insofar as these arts "bring into being things not previously existing in the world," and counterfictional insofar as they provide us with visions of the possible that have the "vivacity, solidity, persistence, and givenness of the perceptible world."[17] What, the *Journal* asks, would it mean to see scholarly publications as a kind of verbal art, one in which the medium of artistic expression is the concepts conceived by a transdisciplinary array of authors?

To imagine with vivacity, to speculate with solidity, to prompt action with persistence, and to give perceptive visions of possible worlds amendable to the future readers of this journal—these are but a few of the possibilities to be found in the pages of the *Journal*.

[17] Scarry, Elaine, "On Vivacity: The Difference between Daydreaming and Imagining-Under-Authorial-Instruction," *Representations*, 52, Fall 1995, 21-22.

Michael Godhe:

Images of desire. Figures of hope. Utopian writing in its many manifestations is complex and contradictory. It is, at heart, rooted in the unfulfilled needs and wants of specific classes, groups, and individuals in their unique historical contexts. Produced through the fantasizing powers of the imagination, utopia opposes the affirmative culture maintained by the dominant ideology. Utopia negates the contradiction in a social system by forging visions of what is not yet realized either in theory or in practice. In generating such figures of hope, utopia contributes to the open space of opposition.

Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*

Is there also hope in dystopia? If utopias generate figures of hope, what can we say about dystopias, especially post-9/11 dystopias? Do they generate figures of despair? On the contrary, they also generate figures of hope—even if hope and despair are hard to disentangle.[19] According to Tom Moylan, our contemporary situation is often described across media platforms as dystopian, producing "a resigned anti-utopian pessimism rather than provoking the prophetic awakening of which dystopian narrative is capable."[20] And Mark Fisher labeled the impotence of imagining alternatives to (neo)liberalism as "capitalist realism."[21] Such a mode of thought "persuad[es] citizens that there is no alternative to the onward march of globalized markets, finance capitalism, deregulation and environmental degradation."[22] Nevertheless, the ethos of *The Journal of Social and Cultural Possibilities* (as well as of the interdisciplinary research field of critical future studies) is to expand the repertoire of possible futures, and utopian and dystopian imaginings create possibilities. And possibilities, when they have persuasive power, are guidelines to action.[23]

According to Ruth Levitas, echoing Ernst Bloch, utopia and utopian thought are "the expression of desire for a better way of living and of being."[24] While utopian thought is a necessary part of the imaginary reconstitution of society, dystopias are demanding and, if they have enough persuasive power, empower us to act to avoid possible futures that are not preferable.[25] So, not only utopia but also dystopia can work as a method—say, dystopia as the expression for representing ways of living and of being we would choose to avoid. For Moylan, dystopias today are not necessarily anti-utopian: "It's time to choose to work from the standpoint of militant, utopian pessimism that is expressed in critical dystopian narratives."[26] In many ways,

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[19] Thaler, Mathias, "Bleak Dreams, Not Nightmares: Critical Dystopias and the Necessity of Melancholic Hope," *Constellations*, 2016, 2; Godhe, Michael, "Hopeful Dystopias? Figures of Hope in the Brazilian Science Fiction Series *3%*," Joe Trotta, Zlatan Filipovic & Houman Sadri (eds), *Broken Mirrors: Representations of Apocalypses and Dystopias in Popular Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 2020), 33-45.

[20] Moylan, Tom, "Further Reflections on Being an Utopian in These Times," *Open Library of Humanities* 4:2, 2018, 2. https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.264

[21] Fisher, Mark, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK & Washington: Zero Boks, 2009).

[22] Goode, Luke & Michael Godhe, "Beyond Capitalist Realism – Why We Need Critical Future Studies," *Culture Unbound*, 9:1, 2017, 110.

[23] Goode & Godhe, "Beyond Capitalist Realism," 108-129.

[24] Levitas, Ruth, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

[25] Claisse, Frédéric & Pierre Delvenne, "Building on Anticipation: Dystopia as Empowerment," *Current Sociology*, 63:2, 2015, 155-169.

[26] Moylan, "Further Reflections on Being an Utopian in These Times," 3.

dystopia is the flip side of the utopian coin since each type of work contains impulses generally associated with the other—that is, both contain a multitude of possibilities, preferable or not,[27] and one person's utopia could be another's dystopia (and vice versa).

To deal with the possible is also to negate the impossible (for example, in the disguise of capitalist realism with its credo that there is no alternative) and to bring the preferable up to the surface. What kind of future do we want? The impossible means the utopian, the imagination of the not-yet in the shape of possibilities. Imagining the possible (and impossible) opens up potentialities instead of shutting down alternatives. To repeat the ethos of this journal (and of critical future studies more broadly): to deal with the possible is not solely to deconstruct imageries of the future in the public sphere but also to expand "the repertoire of potential futures available for public reflection,"[28] to work for and envisage the preferable and desirable rather than the probable and so-called realistic.

The possible is comprised of different layers of time. Future imageries and imaginaries are not only deeply rooted in the present. Possibilities are also deeply rooted and situated in the past. Representations of possible futures in space exploration today, with visions of a multi-planetary future promoted by Musk *et consortes*, like science fiction, are also recalling the myth of the frontier.[29] With inspiration from Reinhart Koselleck, we can conceptualize the past and the future as parallel layers coexisting in every given moment when a phenomenon has been temporalized and "futuralized" (that is, constructed as a part of the discursive practice of futuring).[30] Take, for example, generative AI – it is here now and a part of our future imaginaries. As Roxanne Panchasi emphasizes, "the future anticipated at a particular historical moment can tell us a great deal about the cultural preoccupations and political perspectives of the *present doing the anticipation*."[31] And the future anticipated at a particular moment in history is often more complex than we imagine, something that we must bring up to the surface, what Ruth Levitas labels as the *archeological* mode of utopia as a method: "the excavation of fragments and shards and their recombination into a coherent whole. The point of such archeology is to lay the underpinning model of the good society open to scrutiny and public critique."[32]

One perfect example of a future anticipated at a moment in history is envisaged in Johan Fredrikzon's article in this issue, which explores the exhibition *ARARAT* at Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 1976 and understands it as "pioneering the field of *practical knowledge*," situated in a present dealing with environmental issues.[33] From the point of view of the *Journal* and critical future studies, excavating the visions of the *ARARAT* exhibition both investigates an almost neglected event in the past and at the same time makes it open to scrutiny in the futural

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[27] Cf. Godhe, "Hopeful Dystopias."
[28] Goode & Godhe, "Beyond Capitalist Realism," 127.
[29] See, e.g. Godhe, Michael, "Mars som ett drömlaboratorium för en multiplanetär framtid," *Ikaros: Tidskrift om människan och vetenskapen*, 19:2, 2023, 41-45.
[30] Koselleck, Reinhardt, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (1979; New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Cf. Jordheim, Helge, "Inledning", Reinhart Koselleck (ed.), *Erfarenhet, tid och historia. Om historiska tiders semantik*, translation Joachim Retzlaff (1979; Göteborg: Daidalos, 2004), 9-21, a volume, like the English edition, containing a selection of articles from *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*.
[31] Panchasi, Roxanne, *Future Tense: The Culture of Anticipation in France between the Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 4.
[32] Levitas, Ruth, *Utopia as Method*, xvii.
[33] Fredrikzon, Johan, "Ararat 1976: The Exhibition as Environing Medium," 58.

public sphere.

Past anticipated futures have a very strong influence on how we imagine possible and preferable futures today, visions that often have become congealed. One might think about the belief in progress from the eighteenth century and its varying manifestations in our times. It still holds a stern grip on how we conceive of a future with infinite growth, even if we have reframed the idea of limitless growth by the contested concept of sustainable *development*. And it is not merely in economics that this idea is still strong. One can also notice how the notion of infinite growth or expansion is present in how we look at art and literature—we still celebrate the avant-garde, we do not applaud imitations (with a few postmodern exceptions, of course). But do we need to abandon the idea of progress, or could we reframe the Enlightenment ideals and make them more inclusive and less racist? Is there a future for enlightenment?

To deal with our past and present futurescapes and imagine the possible has become necessary in light of our precarious times and contemporary crises. With democracy no longer a given (democracy is indeed an example of a good imaginary, even if we have to discuss the content in the concept of democracy) and cosmopolitan ideas challenged by local, regional, and national chauvinism, the environmental crisis, ongoing wars, refugee catastrophes, and so on, the deconstruction and certainly the reconstruction of possible futures is a must if we do not want to return to nostalgic backward-looking conservative utopias or blind laissez-faire capitalism disguised as realism. If the probable is indeed dystopian, we can make use of the probable as a kind of method, as a way of envisaging a future we do not want to have. And, to use the words of Tom Moylan, we must demand the impossible because it is possible.

Luke Goode:

Reflecting on the mission of this new journal, I realize that for me there's a touch of haziness, still. Other worlds are possible: is this our foundational premise, the presumption upon which we invite contributors to explore specific possibilities in all their manifold, sometimes surprising, and often contradictory forms? Or is it also part of the *Journal*'s role to remind or—more challenging still—persuade readers that other worlds, other ways of being, living, acting, and experiencing, are in fact possible in the first place? Especially in times that feel bleak, unshakeable, locked onto dismal trajectories, we may sometimes need reminding of the very case for history's non-inevitability.

Readers of this journal will of course be drawn especially to papers which address topics and themes of intrinsic interest and importance to them, prompting close reading and, ideally, inspiring further research and writing on the topic. Specific papers will stand out to, and leave lasting impressions upon, particular readers. But I hope and believe the journal will also invite a more general mode of engagement. Discovering and learning about diverse social and cultural possibilities beyond our own areas of special interest promises not only to broaden our knowledge base but also to energize our imaginations and even elevate our spirits.

Acknowledging the risk of projection, I ask myself what I want from this journal as a reader, not just as a co-editor. Naturally, I want to read papers that speak strongly to me. Whether I seek out those papers because their topics are clearly in my wheelhouse or I find them via more serendipitous encounters, I want to gain new insights and perspectives; I want to be inspired and to see things in new ways. I also look forward to being provoked by some of what I read in these pages because disagreement can be fertile ground for advancing or clarifying our thinking every bit as much as persuasion can.

Much of what appears in this journal, however, will not have that kind of direct or lasting impact upon me as a reader. Will that diminish its value? I suspect not. Will I read instrumentally, directing my attention only to those articles that look to have a clearly defined payoff for my own work? I don't believe so. Viewed as a collection of individual papers, this journal will undoubtedly yield certain treasures for me over the coming years, and other readers will find their own. More commonly, though, papers may not stand out to us individually as rare gems to be picked up, turned around, and examined closely. They may often leave little tangible or lasting impressions upon most readers. And yet, if we're open to viewing the journal as more than the sum of its parts and engaging broadly with the papers that emerge in these pages, then collectively they may offer us something equally precious: not just a few dazzling gems but also many blinking, shimmering pinpricks of light; shifting constellations of "hope in the dark," to borrow Rebecca Solnit's evocative phrase, that even in our peripheral vision may help us sense more expansive horizons of possibility, engaging our sense of agency and drawing us away from any temptation towards fatalistic passivity.[34]

In a very real sense, this new journal aspires to be a counterweight, however modest, to the overwhelming focus on diagnostic critique within the critical humanities and social sciences. At first glance, the qualifier "critical" here could make this statement seem absurdly tautological: it hardly seems reasonable to call out "critical" scholarship for centering critique. But I would argue the problem lies not with our commitment to criticality but with our tendency to limit its

[34] Solnit, Rebecca, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019).

scope. Critical traditions and modes of inquiry seek to go beyond mere description and are not content to leave the status quo unquestioned. This is because they are driven by an ethical commitment to greater human (sometimes also non-human) flourishing, and the reduction of suffering and injustice.[35] Yet critical humanistic and social science scholarship—at least over the decades coinciding with my own academic career—has all too rarely dared to venture beyond the diagnostic, whether through fear of being scorned for naivete by one's academic peers, through wider social conditioning against "dangerous utopianism," or through a sense of helplessness in confronting the magnitude, range, and complexity of crises besetting us.[36] There are of course shining exceptions.[37] And it would be gratifying if the *Journal of Social and Cultural Possibilities* came in time to stand out as a shining exception in its own right. But wouldn't it be immeasurably more rewarding if, looking back in several years' time, the launch of the *Journal* transpired to be just one of many examples (albeit a notable one) of a more general and sustained turn towards possibilism and towards futures-thinking within the humanities and social sciences? Indeed, the recent launch of *Possibility Studies & Society* (published by Sage) is one exciting sign of a potential wider movement in this direction.

But here then, we run up against the limitations and potentially misleading nature of the "counterweight" metaphor. I don't believe we're in the business of simply rebalancing the scales, highlighting a few positive signs here and there to offset some of the debilitatingly dire prognoses pervading our times. Rather than thinking of hope and despair as a zero-sum game, we instead need to enrich our conception of criticality. If we profess to be "critical" scholars, we arguably have an ethical obligation to get our hands dirty and to explore potential pathways beyond the status quo that we've analyzed and found wanting. Constructive exploration of possibilities, in other words, works *through* rather than to the side of diagnostic critique. Progress cannot be made without clear-sighted acknowledgement of societal failings and injustices or frank reckonings with the scale and complexities of the challenges we face.[38] I would not be part of this editorial collective if I believed that, through its mission of inviting scholars to publish research foregrounding possibility, the *Journal* somehow incentivized authors to gloss over the sobering realities of our times.

Quoting Gramsci's "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" may be customary at times like these. Irrespective of Gramsci's broader influence on my own work, this overworn (and in any case misattributed) quote doesn't work for me. [39] Not only would I choose *hope* over optimism, but I also prefer *honesty* over pessimism of the intellect any day of the week: honesty in both the diagnosis and the *prognosis*; honesty about the very real, absolutely constrained, but

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[35] Within critical theory, Habermas and others refer to this as the "emancipatory interest" that underpins critique. Controversially, Habermas's early writings also argued that the emancipatory interest was not just inherent in critical scholarship but also embedded within the very structure of human cognition. See Habermas, Jürgen, *Knowledge and Human Interests,* 2nd English ed. (1968; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

[36] I should acknowledge the rather personal nature of this reflection and confess that I've felt the weight of all three of these fears at times, and sometimes still find myself wrestling with them.

[37] See, e.g., the "Real Utopias" project run by the late sociologist Erik Olin Wright and colleagues. See especially Wright, Erik Olin, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso Books, 2010).

[38] The title of one of activist and investigative journalist Naomi Klein's excellent books speaks to me here: "No is not enough". Saying "no" has been and always will be vital, in other words, but not *enough.* See Klein, Naomi, *No Is Not Enough: Defeating the New Shock Politics* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

[39] For an example of this misattribution, see Panitch, Leo, "On Revolutionary Optimism of the Intellect," *Socialist Register*, 53, 2017, 356.

also frequently understated and underexplored scope for human agency and the potential for positive social change.[40]

Here's another well-used though much more recent quote, this one from the late and great explorer of other possible worlds, Ursula K. Le Guin: "We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."[41] These arrestingly simple words seem all the more powerful when encountered in context: coming in the midst of a relatively prosaic discussion about the state of the book publishing industry, they yield just the kind of rhetorical jolt so many of us need in these times to awaken us from fatalistic slumber. *Of course* other worlds are possible! History makes this so blindingly obvious, how could we possibly think otherwise? A moment's thought reminds us that neither capitalism nor any other apparatus of oppression, injustice, or folly stands inviolable against the winds of history, however much we experience their deadening, immovable weight pressing down upon us from within the narrow temporality of our individual life spans.

Yet despite their arresting simplicity and rousing (perhaps idealistic) call to bold ambition, on closer inspection Le Guin's words also suggest a certain caution. Note the author only promises us here that *human* powers can be resisted. Where to draw the line, though, between human and nonhuman powers? This question has always been a challenge for historians and social scientists interested in the workings of complex societies and the ways in which they both endure and change. Institutions, languages, cultural value systems, technologies—all are the products of cumulative human actions but can, to all intents and purposes, take on lives of their own; in Marx's phrase (though it is by no means an exclusively Marxist insight), they come to represent a kind of "inhuman power" standing over us.[42] This is why the very possibility of radical and intentional social change (overthrowing the divine right of kings, for example) can only be properly comprehended as the product of complex struggles played out across multiple generations, even when decisive turning points arrive in sudden revolutionary moments. It is no bad thing, in other words, to balance ambition in our sense of possibility with a realistic dose of humility and patience in the face of entrenched structures of oppression, injustice, or societal folly.

So much for the normal business of history and social change. How much more challenging still does it become to distinguish human from nonhuman powers as we now confront the unprecedented challenges of the Anthropocene? At the very least we are challenged to confront the question of how much we have, under the sway of hubristic ideologies of Western Enlightenment and scientific triumphalism, greatly overestimated the human capacity to predict, let alone master and control, nonhuman actants including ecosystems, bacteria and viruses, weather, climate, and atmospheric systems. [43] All of these things represent complex and

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[40] For more on the preference for hope over optimism, see, e.g., Levitas, Ruth, *The Concept of Utopia* (1990; Lausanne: Peter Lang Ltd., 2011), and in particular her engagement with Ernst Bloch in that work; see also Eagleton, Terry, *Hope Without Optimism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

[41] Le Guin, Ursula K., "Speech in Acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters," The 65th National Book Awards on November 19, 2014. https://www.ursulakleguin.com/nbf-medal (accessed 01/04/24).

[42] Marx, Karl, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (London, UK: Penguin, 1992), 71; see also Dyer-Witherford, Nick, Atle Mikkola Kjosen & James Steinhoff, *Inhuman Power: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

[43] For clarity, this is neither an "anti-science" nor "anti-Enlightenment" point. I refer to these as *ideologies* intentionally because they represent distortions that bely the reflexivity at the heart of Enlightenment and scientific

interconnected systems we have now irrevocably changed in ways we do not yet and may never fully understand, the unpredictable consequences of which are rebounding on us now and promise to fundamentally reshape life in the future.

We find ourselves at a frighteningly perilous point in history where even the enduring existence of the human species can no longer be taken as a given. We're challenged to re-examine the fundamental ontology of Western modernity, in which we've situated ourselves as human actors apart from and above nonhuman systems. So far, our response to that challenge has been slow and belated at best, so much irreversible damage having already been done. Of course all is not lost—far from it. But again, the work of possibilism has to proceed against a backdrop of realism about the ways in which the future has already been colonized.[44] Locked-in global warming is probably the starkest example here. In simplistic terms, the fight to avert the unthinkably catastrophic consequences of a three-to-four-degrees Celsius rise in global temperature is still in play. It may be futile, however, to pretend that a rise of one and a half or even two degrees is anything other than a virtual certainty at this point. Arguably, a misguided sense of possibility here would not simply be naive but also counterproductive. In this view, attention in this space will need to focus not on the search for illusory solutions but on creative thinking around possibilities for mitigating the devastation to come (as well as that already underway); new ways of addressing the injustices of climate change whereby those communities most vulnerable to its consequences are largely those least responsible for them; and exploring imaginative possibilities for supporting human and nonhuman flourishing in a world of warming temperatures, rising sea levels, and increasing extreme weather events.

While the climate issue is critical, I raise it here only to exemplify a more general point that might equally apply whether we are focused on new technologies, social and political upheavals, or any other domain. My point, in fact, comprises both a hope and a claim. Firstly, I hope this journal will prove to be equally hospitable to ambitious and expansive thinking on the one hand, *and* to realism and humility on the other, because we urgently need both of these to help us navigate these times. Secondly, I want to claim that while these values may sometimes need to be held in tension, they can also work together. Realism and humility need not shrink the horizon of possibility. As Glăveanu puts it: "The possible *depends* on constraints.…Constraints—themselves never fully fixed in time and space—are *enablers* of our relationship with what is possible."[46] Consider the example I gave above: creative thinking around possibilities for reducing suffering and supporting flourishing can *flow from* a realistic acceptance that at least some measure of climate chaos is irrevocably upon us, from humility in acknowledging our failures in preventing this, and from avoiding hubristic illusions of conjuring straightforward "solutions" (technological or otherwise) to what has become such an immeasurably complex challenge.

This brings us back to those words: "Any human power can be resisted *and changed*." Le Guin was a careful wordsmith, and I think the "and" here matters. Resistance and change are inextricably connected, but they are not one and the same. In so many ways, we cannot improve the world without resistance, refusal, and condemnation. But sometimes it is also wise to seek change in other, more creative ways. Moving beyond a resistance frame may demand both more

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reasoning. Nor should this statement give the misleading impression I buy into the colonial myth that "science" and "Enlightenment" thinking are uniquely products of "Western" societies (see, e.g., Sardar, Ziauddin, "Conquests, Chaos and Complexity: the Other in Modern and Postmodern Science," *Futures*, 26:6, 1994, 665-682).

[44] See Adam, Barbara & Chris Groves, *Future Matters: Action, Knowledge, Ethics* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2007).

[46] Glăveanu, Vlad, "Possibility studies: a manifesto," *Possibility Studies & Society*, 1:1-2, 2023, 4 (emphasis added).

humility (seeing there are things we cannot change, to invoke the old Serenity Prayer), and yet also greater ambition: the courage to imagine differently and to think creatively about other axes of possibility besides resistance; the capacity to step outside the shadow of the thing we wish were different. Imagination and thoughtful speculation become ever more vital in what futures scholar Ziauddin Sardar calls "post-normal times,"[47] in which we must increasingly think the unthinkable, imagining unprecedented possibilities (good, bad, and everything in between).[48] But creation and creativity do not occur in a vacuum and are not founded on pure novelty. The past is also a rich source for imaginative thinking about the future. Drawing on Ruth Levitas's work, Michael Godhe has already highlighted the importance of this "archaeological" mode of possibility-thinking in the previous section: revealing, reassessing, and reassembling in new ways phenomena that already exist now or which existed in the past. Revisiting and learning not only from successful examples of future-making (be they emancipatory struggles, artistic movements, or other cultural phenomena) but also from paths not taken, once-possible futures foreclosed, and opportunities lost, we discover that "looking backwards" can expand our vision of the future rather than narrow it, as is often assumed.[49] Whether we are looking at past, present, or future, we can see that creativity and resistance aren't mutually exclusive: there is creativity and imagination to be found *in* resistance. But we can see too that there is great creative possibility *beyond* resistance: not only against but also through, with, and around.

[47] Sardar, Ziauddin, "Welcome to Postnormal Times," *Futures*, 42:5, 2010, 435-444.
[48] See, e.g., Dator, James, "What Futures Studies Is, and Is Not," in *Jim Dator: A Noticer in Time (Selected work, 1967–2018)* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2019).
[49] For a good recent example of this method applied to the domain of new and future technologies, see O'Shea, Lizzie, *Future Histories: What Ada Lovelace, Tom Paine and the Paris Commune can teach us about digital technology* (London: Verso Books, 2020).