



“Im/Possibility:

On the Production, Distribution, and Articulation of the Possible and the Impossible”

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Yes, gentlemen, the Commune [...] wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour. But this is communism, ‘impossible’ communism!

– Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*

In *Luke 18:27*, Jesus tells his disciples, “What is impossible with Man, is possible with God,” thus positing an onto-theological relation between the possible and the impossible that allows utopia to be thought but negatively. In the sphere of real politics (or *Realpolitik*)—characterized today by pervasive neoliberal governance and rhetoric—negativity as such is habitually disavowed. But while few have demarcated im/possibility as crudely as then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (“there is no alternative”) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel (“unsere Politik ist alternativlos”), affirmative humanist and progressive neoliberal discourse such as Barack Obama’s “Yes, we can!” or Merkel’s by now infamous “Wir schaffen das!”—which squarely and involuntarily echos the Jacobin’s and sans-culottes’s “Ça ira!”—likewise partakes in the material-symbolic production, distribution, and articulation of the possible and the impossible. Understood in this way, the possible and the impossible are always-already intertwined and contingent upon “conditions of im/possibility” of knowledge and experience (Kant/Derrida), knowledge bound to power (Foucault/Mbembe), emancipation and domination (Hegel/Marx/Fanon/Davis).

Critiquing the Im/Possible

If neoliberalism, in both its progressive and authoritarian incarnations, remains the dominant ideology and form of crisis management of today’s global capitalism, this is also because the possible and impossible, in political-economic terms, are tied to capital’s “moving contradiction” (Marx, *Grundrisse*) and “absolute law of accumulation” (Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, Chapter 25). As Slavoj Žižek succinctly put it:

Impossible and possible are distributed in strange ways today. On the one hand, in the domain of personal freedoms and scientific technology we are told, again and again, how nothing is impossible [...] everything is possible. On the other hand, especially in the domain of socio-economic relations, our era perceives itself as the era of maturity, in which, with the collapse of communist states, humanity finally has abandoned the old millenarian dreams and accepted the constraints of “reality”—which means, of course, “capitalist reality” with all its impossibilities. [...] Again, our first task is to be always aware that when we are told, “this is possible, this is not possible,” we are talking about ideology. (“Beyond Mandela without becoming Mugabe,” Hamburg, November 19, 2015)

Today, the very idea of a radical social transformation appears as an impossible dream. When “internment camps and franchise coffee bars coexist” (Fisher 2009: 2), the spectrum of the



possible paradoxically seems to extend endlessly, regardless of the fact that what it covers in Fisher's example constitutes by all means an ethical impossibility. And yet capitalism so pervasively "occupies the horizons of the thinkable" that the "struggle between *detournement* and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, seems to have been played out" (9). In Fisher's view then, change cannot come from emphasis of the ways in which this naturalized social order causes suffering: exposing or demystifying the rather grim conditions under which the coffee-franchise bar can co-exist with the internment camp, "emphasizing the way in which [the system that enables this grotesque constellation] leads to suffering" (16) is all too easily contained within a capitalist realism that effectively disavows the "unconditional Real of global capital" (Žižek 1999: 4) through its very symptoms. ("I know very well, but ...").

At the same time, the combination of global economic and ecological crisis (cf. Foster et al. 2010, Moore 2015, Malm 2016, Malm 2017, Clover 2018, McDuff 2019, Tapia 2019, St. Clair 2019) seems to make radical social transformation a factual, even existential, necessity, especially if we assume that "we cannot legislate and spend our way out of catastrophic global warming" (Bernes 2019). New materialist accounts of the alleged impossibility of disentangling nature and society tend to occlude the material underpinnings of "the progress of this storm" (Malm 2017). For instance, hybrid "actor-networks" (Latour 2005), "hyperobjects" (Morton 2013) or "vibrant matter" (Bennett 2009) are taken to work themselves out, in trajectories that recede from historical materialist analysis and transformative action alike. Such emphasis on the mesh of "natureculture" (Haraway 2003) coincides with the blurring of political and "bare life" (Agamben 1998) in the production of surplus populations and contemporary border and migration regimes. Yet contemporary liberalism does not shy away from brutal austerity, militarized policing and border regimes, mass deportation, mass incarceration, economic and preemptive war to protect the logic of state and capital, while implicitly and/or explicitly delineating a whole set of political-economic, social, and cultural impossibilities. What appears in these phenomena, however, is a possibility (even necessity) of an outside of capitalist realism, a glimpse at a true breaking point for the naturalized illusion of a reality that ostensibly is without alternatives. Žižek makes a similar point when he identifies the "commons of external nature" and the problem of the "excluded" (i.e. from capitalist exploitation) as two of the possible antagonisms "strong enough to prevent [global capitalism's] indefinite reproduction" (Žižek 2009: 53). Outside of these antagonisms, he pointedly argues, any attempt at the kind of moralizing criticism that Fisher invokes are condemned to remain safely within the realms of capitalist realism—alternatives in kind, not in quality, liberal self-assurance of the possibility of a sustainable high-tech capitalism with a human face.

Since the neoliberal state is "at once both the precondition, and result of, conditions of capital accumulation [...] the present crisis of capital expresses itself as a crisis of the state" (Surplus Club) that is characterized by debt, austerity, and repression. Continued neoliberal austerity significantly lowers the capitalist state's share of the cost for the reproduction of labor. But this is a policy that inevitably results in increased immiseration, militarized policing, carceral management, and riots: Clichy-Sous-Bois, Tottenham, Ferguson, Baltimore, Oakland, etc. (cf. esp. Gilmore 2007, Wacquant 2009, Clover 2016). Given that some of capitalism's most successful managers today are authoritarian regimes, a mere defense of liberal democracy and civil society against the recent onslaught of political reaction—from Trump's American Bonapartism and encroaching neofascism under Orban or Bolsonaro to Modi's Hindu-Nationalism and Erdogan's Islamist Nationalism—increasingly appears as a rather hopeless endeavor. The tradition of "authoritarian liberalism" (Bonefeld 2017) understands perfectly well that the state is a



condition of possibility for the ‘free market economy’ that needs to be seized and held by force if necessary. Trumpism epitomizes the governance of an authoritarian neoliberal ‘racket’ at the behest of capitalist social relations, to protect the existing regime of accumulation at immense human and non-human costs. Since the 2008 financial crash and ensuing great recession the neoliberal doxa “there is no alternative,” if still dominant, is in the process of breaking up and giving way to the New Right’s authoritarian populism and creeping fascism. In other words: im/possibility has (been) shifted from TINA (“there is no alternative”) to MAGA (“Make America Great Again”). “America,” in particular, as it remains the world system’s increasingly contested hegemonic power, but also Britain, Germany, Turkey, Russia, or Brazil, for that matter.

Contesting the Im/Possible

Over and against hegemonic discourses and material-symbolic practices of producing, distributing, and articulating the im/possible stand various counter-hegemonic discourses and practices of the exploited and excluded that signal a break and claim the possibility, even necessity, to re-distribute and re-articulate the im/possible and transform their modes of production. Whether we agree with Fredric Jameson (or Žižek) that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” and Fisher’s own critique of “capitalist realism,” where capitalism “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (Fischer 2009: 2), or not, radical history chronicles both the emancipatory endeavors to contest and transform the im/possible (slave revolts, bourgeois revolutions, socialist revolutions, civil rights, women’s suffrage, gay liberation, black liberation, anti-colonial struggle, immigrant rights, etc.) and the challenge of acknowledging their historical contingency. “When one has no right to speak under the auspices of the universal, and speaks none the less, one speaks in a way that may be readily dismissed as nonsensical or impossible” (Butler 2000: 39-40)—such “perverse reiteration” of impossibility itself marks the spot for the possible contestation of demands, of concrete universality. In this sense, im/possibility can be understood as part of the ideological terrain of the battle between the suturing logic of Law and the emancipatory logic of Desire (cf. Badiou 2011) as well as the historical materialist’s epistemological and revolutionary task “to blast open the continuum of history” (*Theses on the Philosophy of History* [1940], Benjamin 2007: 262).

In the wake of 2008 a growing number of philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic have reconsidered and affirmed the “communist horizon” (Dean) or “communist hypothesis” (Badiou)—chiefly understood as “the proposition that the subordination of labor to the dominant class is not inevitable” (Badiou 2008: 37). That is to say, the question of the im/possibility of communism has returned with full force, even to the academic Left. Frank Ruda, for instance, has asked us to draw a (philosophical) line in the sand:

Today there is a fundamental reversibility of the possible and the necessary. If one enquires about the possible and the impossible of an action here and now, one asks about that which we see and that which we do not see, about that which we cannot see when we establish the parameters—the content and the form—of an action. This means that any action that seems possible is an action which is determined as possible by the coordinates of the situation itself: possible actions are pseudo-actions, real actions have to appear impossible. *Voilà, la première ligne de démarcation*” (Ruda 2012: 297).



Hence Marx's notion of "impossible communism" *practiced* by the Paris Commune in 1871—a historical model of communist praxis and "communal luxury" (Kristin Ross) more recently championed from the perspective of Marxian crisis theory and so-called "communization theory" within the pages of *Endnotes* and *Commune*.

That the Commune is a matter of "representational uncertainty" (Wagner-Pacifici 2017: 105) can be seen as a mark in its favor: between "urban revolt, socialist revolution, an anarchist rebellion, a municipal revolution, or a civil war" (106), its apparent impossibility opens a space for the retroactive production, distribution, and articulation of its own conditions—in 1871 and today. The Commune, as the im/possible political form assumed by the power of the proletariat's (anticipated) practical self-abolition, negating and destroying the old state power, does not signify the constitution of a new political power according to a utopian vision: rather it is an instrument which, as Marx says, "serve[s] as a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes" (*The Civil War in France*). Thus, according to Marx, the task accomplished by the working class is not primarily political in nature: it is a social task which, naturally, passes through a political moment and political means, but whose purpose is always social. Marx and Engels's earlier notion of "the real movement [wirkliche Bewegung] which abolishes [aufhebt] the present state of things" (*The German Ideology*) likewise is an anti-utopian model of im/possible emancipation. Here we find a rather succinct formulation of the immanence of communism to the present social formation. But, as Franck Fischbach is careful to caution (against Hardt and Negri's metapolitical conception of the "multitude"), "if certain tendencies of Marx's thought head in this direction, this does not necessarily mean that there already exist in the present capitalist society objective elements of communism whose immanent development can carry this society beyond itself" (Fischbach 2011: 17). In other words: struggle is mandatory.

Forms of Im/Possibility

The forthcoming special issue of *Coils of the Serpent* thus intends to examine various facets, modes, and agents of the material and symbolic production, distribution, and articulation of im/possibility across various media. We seek to analyze and critique the dominant forms of im/possibility from the perspectives of critical theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy, history, sociology, political science, literature, and cultural studies, and to debate the pressing questions of what material, discursive, psychosocial and affective constraints on subjectivity and agency exist today that help reproduce or contest a neoliberal and increasingly authoritarian "consensus," or what Jacques Rancière has aptly called "the police distribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2010 [1995]). We hope to bring together authors who draw on (post-)Marxist critical theory and/or the tradition of Birmingham Cultural Studies to analyze and critique the historical formation, material conditions, cultural representation, and political distribution or articulation of the im/possibility of radical social transformation, new forms of social struggle and solidarity, automation and digitalization, green capitalism, neoliberalism, economic nationalism, fascism, gender abolition, black liberation, communism, and all forms of emancipatory practice.

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