

Making Tomorrow Another Day

by Jean-Louis Fabiani

Is another world possible? Answering this question requires us to first ask ourselves what “possible” might mean. We must return to the classics: from Aristotle to Bourdieu, many authors can help us understand what an alternative might look like.

Reviewed: Haud Guéguen and Laurent Jeanpierre, *La perspective du possible. Comment penser ce qui peut nous arriver, et ce que nous pouvons faire*, Paris, La Découverte, L’horizon des possibles collection, 2022, 328 p., €22.

“There Is No Alternative,” Margaret Thatcher used to say, thus closing off the horizon of the possible with a single acronym (TINA). The end of real socialism and its apparent corollary, the end of the Cold War, supported the idea that the concept of emancipation or, more simply, of any voluntary change brought about by collective action and guided by a political project, had become obsolete. The perspective of “capitalism, alone”, as Branko Milanovic put it, has tended to make the very idea of social transformation difficult to imagine¹. The neoliberal worldview has transformed social agents into entrepreneurs of themselves, inattentive to what is happening in the world and to the misery of others.

¹ Milanovic B. *Capitalism, Alone: The Future of the System That Rules the World*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2019.

A Return to Critical Theory

It is this state of affairs that has inspired one of the most ambitious theoretical analyses to have been put forward for several years. Indeed, a large amount of discourse that is hostile to neoliberalism is more rhetorical than analytic, and doomed to remain without effect. The feelings of disempowerment and concern for oneself prevail over any perspective of change. We love saying that another world is possible, but we go no further, because we do not have the tools that would allow us to explore the realm of possibilities we do have before us. Haud Guéguen and Laurent Jeanpierre explicitly reconnect with an intellectual tradition – critical theory – and attempt to adapt it to the constraints of our present situation. The current format of capitalism pushes agents to adopt a presentist mode of thinking; the idea that there is “no future” has largely been internalised by those who are most at risk of suffering from economic transformations. By emphasising the disenchantment of the world, the social sciences have contributed to the evanescence of our sense of what is possible, which is now limited by the necessity of tying it to our sense of what is real. This book opens with a quote from Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*, which well sums up the book’s central argument: “We thus might define the sense of the possible as the ability to conceptualise what could ‘just as well’ be, and to not grant more importance to what is than to what is not’ (p. 5). This great book is in fact not the best reference to start thinking about the conditions of a glorious future, since it so exhaustively analyses the conditions that lead to impotence and apathy. The interlacing of determinism and contingency that Musil describes does not open up onto the perspective of a partial mastery of historical conditions through which the sense of the possible could be deployed.

The book never takes a purely theoretical perspective. The reader is warned from the introduction: “How can we turn this new and fragile knowledge into a weapon of critical thought, the possible key to a new, transformative and liberating action?” (p. 11). This is a remarkable sentence: the emancipatory perspective, which is expressed in the traditional lexicon of the radical left, is nevertheless reconfigured through this double reference to the fragility of the knowledge produced and the uncertain character of the potential held within this key that has been forged by critical locksmiths. We might translate this point of view by saying that a possible tomorrow may, perhaps, be another day. In this respect, the fascinating theoretical rearmament offered by this book falls within the scope of what we might call the inevitable realism promoted by the social sciences as they simultaneously reveal the conditions that make

us act and the contingency that renders all of our actions uncertain, in particular because they are always liable to deviate from their determined trajectory or because they necessarily have unintended consequences (to use Robert K. Merton's definition of the term). We are close here to what Pierre Bourdieu judiciously called a *Realpolitik* of reason.

A Historical Enquiry into the Concept of the Possible

The book is constructed around a series of nine chapters, opened by a prelude, intercut with an interlude, and concluded by an epilogue. The five chapters preceding the interlude present a history of ideas: Aristotle, Marx, Weber, Mannheim, Lukacs and Ernst Bloch are reread with rigour and originality, and with critical theory as a strong foundation that allows the authors to compare the powers of different, strongly interconnected conceptualisations. The interest displayed here in the Great Texts is no more the result of a scholastic habitus than the manifestation of a dream of returning to some great, overarching theory. In fact, concepts are treated here inasmuch as they can inform the enquiry into the realms of the possible. While more recent authors – such as Bourdieu, Boltanski, Habermas, Karsenti and Latour – are often invited to the table of what is possible, the presence of the Frankfurt School is striking, as a kind of unsurpassable matrix of critical thought. The four chapters that follow the interlude, which we might view as constituting a second part of the book, are focussed on an enquiry into the conditions of possibility of a praxeology of the possible guided by the analysis of concrete utopias or real utopias.

As with any other concept, the possible is the object of an incessant struggle over its legitimate definition. It is constructed out of a series of oppositions to other concepts (the impossible, the real, the necessary, the current), but the way it is articulated against its opposites varies considerably: in the best of all possible worlds, the idea of the possible defined as a fissure, however slight it might be, in the compact mass of real conditions, has no meaning. The concept of the possible can only have a genuine impact if it is taken as part of a space of possibilities, as constructed by phenomenology and taken up again by Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu in a passably different configuration. The possible only exists in the plural, in an openness that this spatial metaphor allows us to conceive of: the idea of a field of possibles implies that there be at least two possible orientations. A central question, which the authors of the book do not particularly take an interest in, is that of the unequal and socially

determined perception of possibilities. Bourdieu has gotten us used to viewing choice as an illusion, while also showing in his analysis that the habitus is not devoid of a power to act and that it can even be very creative. The tension between the determinism that is expressed through what he calls the causality of the probable and the active dimension of the habitus pervades all of his work. This is why it is difficult to decide between those who uphold a determinist view of his work (in which individuals spontaneously adjust to their possibilities as determined by the different types of capital they have at their disposal) and a view in which the reflexivity enabled by field theory opens up, or rather half-opens, the possibility of emancipation.

As an object of incessant struggles to appropriate it, as is shown by theories of human potential and various forms of forecasts conceived as the management of highly uncertain situations, which lead to presenting a whole range of “scenarios”, as we see in IPCC reports – the possible is a “front”, as Guéguen and Jeanpierre put it. The analyses that are presented in the first chapter (“The Front of the Possible”) are probably too brief to convey the multiple forms that this front can take, and the relationships that might be deduced from it regarding the entanglements between an idea of social emancipation and an idea of human potential and of the enhancement or deepening of the self that this promises: both are the result of the same matrix – an Enlightenment view of human perfectibility – but they bifurcate at the point where technologies of power come up against the quest for democracy. This chapter could be expanded into a whole, long book, and is not necessarily connected to the rest of the authors’ argument.

From Marx to Ernst Bloch

Said argument, as we have already mentioned, is based on a return to the classics. The chapter on Marx reminds us that the concept of the possible arises in two contexts in particular. The first is the analysis of the opposition between labour and capital: the figure of the free worker as an abstract power of labour can only be actualised for their Other. The second is that of the conditions required for a revolutionary movement to emerge: here, Marx constructs his argumentation according to the Hegelian view of history as a process in which the possible appears as a dimension of reality, as is suggested by the concept of “real possibility”. It is indeed a historical process which dissolves the current state of things and turns the possible into a new, real state of affairs. Although the authors do not insist on this, the

processual ontology as defined and used by Hegel renders meaningless the very idea of the plurality of possible worlds, which they themselves are attempting to restore. In any case, the question of determinism or of necessity in history configures the concept of the possible: if the real possible is the only possible, then there is no longer any possible that is merely possible. History unfolds in a unilinear process that is very different from the processual analyses of contemporary sociology, which make room for accidents and contingency without giving in to the opposites of vectorisation: in this respect, we might mention the work of Andrew Abbott, who leads us to viewing history as the site of an interlacing of lines or “lineages” rather than the unequivocal unravelling of a line that is continuously unravelling². Marx’s anti-utopianism is undoubtedly a result of his Hegelian view of history, even if it also allows him to ensure the legitimate monopoly of materialist science against all competitors inspired by Utopian socialism. Communism is even less likely to be created than it is to be dreamt of. It has meaning only in the folds of its historical necessity. This is why, even if it largely draws on it, *La perspective du possible* is not strictly speaking a contribution to orthodox Marxism. We might think, even if it is not necessarily a very clear-cut case, that the rendering obsolete of Marxism as put forward by Cornelius Castoriadis based on ideas of creation and auto-institution might allow us to reinstitute the concept of the possible, and consequently of a certain legitimacy of utopia.

The connection the authors suggest between Marx and Weber is original because it is the result of a twist. We can find a theory of the possible in the epistemological texts of the former. The idea of objective possibility conditions the possibility of creating adequate causal connections. The possible becomes a logical category and a kind of reasoning capable of supporting the work of causal imputation, of constructing a non-normative definition of the ideal type, and contributing to a line of thought based on counterfactuals (what might have happened if...), of which Weber is one of the great initiators.

The Weberian idea of objective possibility was taken up again in later attempts to rework Marxism, as is illustrated to the highest degree by the thinking of Lukacs. The Hungarian philosopher proceeds by extraction: he removes objective possibility from its epistemological framework and, as it were, re-politicises it. Let us say at this point that Weber’s epistemology is never neutral: behind its neo-Kantian conceptual apparatus hides a sharp criticism of the way Marx confuses theory with history. With Lukacs, on a theoretical level at least, we can view objective possibility as an

² Abbott, A. *Processual Sociology*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

epistemologico-political instrument allowing us to identify the conditions of revolutionary action. We know that Lukacs would retrospectively view this theoretical approach as unsatisfactory: at least it allowed Ernst Bloch to leave behind the purely negative definition of utopia as a lack of science in the socialist movement and to reintegrate it into the space of possibles.

This reintegration had a price. Marx and Weber were, each in their own way, theoreticians of historical enquiry, and produced very brilliant ones of their own. Lukacs was working in this tradition, despite being less interested in the constraints of empiricity. With Bloch, who did not hesitate to criticise the “sociologism” of Lukacs, we are returning to a purely philosophical view of history which the social sciences have always wanted to leave behind, for better or for worse. This is an issue that the authors do not raise, but which nevertheless is absolutely legitimate.

Real Utopias and New Spaces of the Possible

The interlude that follows the first part of the book is where the authors devote a few pages to presenting a decisive moment in the idea of the possible, which starts with the Frankfurt School and ends with the possibilisms of Hirschman, Wallerstein and Tilly. Everything goes very fast here, and we would have liked to have more time to delve into the complexities, and occasional contradictions, of these theoretical constructs.

The second part moves away from theory in order to consider a genuine space of enquiry into the question of what is possible. We should start by saying that this space remains very largely a theoretical one, since it opens on a remarkable chapter devoted to Karl Mannheim, who is quite seldom favoured in the history of ideas. This Hungarian philosopher rehabilitates utopia in Marxist thought, but measures its fragility more than anyone else does: as is impeccably demonstrated here, his texts provide a framework for analysis allowing us to measure the relationship between subjective hopes and concrete social movements aiming for change. The three other chapters, which could be better linked together, respectively analyse the real utopias of the American Marxist sociologist Eric Olin Wright, the analysis of the possible that can be drawn from Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological work and, finally, on the eruption of the end of times into the public space which characterises our present historical moment.

It is a very good idea to analyse Wright's work in a book devoted to the idea of the possible. He is little known in France, and has devoted part of his research to what he calls "real utopias". Despite being a strictly conforming Marxist, he restores the power to act according to the usual terms of American democracy. The ability to organise is thus key to the possibility of creating alternatives within the very heart of capitalist society. Utopian realism requires that the viability of each project be rationally evaluated. The utopia is localised and contextualised: the conditions of its feasibility must be strictly measured. What then is the capacity for change inherent to each real utopia? It seems that we must look for these more on the side of exemplarity (showing that another world is possible within the ordinary world) than on the side of effective transformations of capitalism. However, this revising downwards of our ambitions is only an impression, since real utopias are characterised by their capacity to multiply and, therefore, their cumulativeness.

The chapter devoted to Bourdieu is mainly based on his works on Algeria, which are free from the conceptual systematicity of maturity and still owe a lot to his reading of Weber. The traditional order owes its symbolic power to the fact that it is only the only one possible. It falls within a cyclical relationship to time, the analysis of which is the best aspect of Bourdieu's ethnological enterprise. Capitalism introduces a space of possibles whose characteristics is that it makes more complex the relationship between "objective chances" (as defined by Weber) and subjective hopes (meaning the more or less adequately defined contours of a possible future based on a practical sense). This analysis of Bourdieu's works is correct, although it refuses to draw any conclusions on what is usually described as Bourdieu's determinism. Somewhat timidly, the authors leave readers to draw their own conclusions: "whatever his inflexions and conclusions, which will seem pessimistic to some or realistic to others, Bourdieu's central contribution to the perspective of the possible is also that it offers a vast set of new objects for our enquiry" (p. 252). We might add here that the situations of disadjustment between subjective hopes and objective chances which disturb the regular functioning of the adjuster-habitus are usually conceived of as hysteresis, meaning as a mechanical delay of systems for recognising the real and not as revolutionary anticipation. We know that it is up to sociology as scientific knowledge to produce social lucidity regarding the state of the possible, as a kind of theoretical avant-garde with the ability to enlighten the people.

The final chapter is probably the least successful, for it bites off more than it can chew, namely a mixed bag of issues that would deserve at least ten books. The absence of any alternative included in the programme of neoliberalism has given rise to a host

of new discourses on what is possible, in a disorderly fashion whose deregulated atmosphere, apocalyptic tone and multiplication of preachers and little prophets hell-bent on ripping into Modernity is rather well captured by the authors. We might say that if there is no possible alternative, then all fantastical alternatives are possible and the spectre of the apocalypse could feed into collective inaction. The end of times has become a topos.

Conclusion

This book is perhaps less “incisive” than its authors claim, in particular because it refuses to carry out a sharp criticism of the authors studied, preferring – probably for good reason – to highlight what makes them compatible. The vocabulary of emancipation is omnipresent. It would have been interesting to compare it with Bruno Latour’s condemnation of the concept. For this author, emancipation is an illusion of the Moderns, which we must leave behind in order to reconnect with and multiply our attachments to the Earth. He writes: “End of emancipation as the only possible destiny”³). He invites us to abandon the idea with insistence, as do many other antimodern thinkers.

One detail to finish: the authors make fruitful and repeated use of the idea of “latent tradition”, without actually defining it. Let us therefore specify that a latent tradition is a kind of intellectual lineage that does not need to present itself as such in order to be efficient, unlike manifest tradition, which has every chance of being an invented tradition and of being the object of a narrative⁴.

The irony of history is such that this book was published just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine: a possible that some had not thought possible even though many indicators suggested its possibility. “How to think about what can happen to us” is the subtitle of this book. A vast space of possibles thus opens up to a new critical theory, the foundation of which this remarkable book has made a decisive contribution to.

³ Latour, B., *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 10.

⁴ Fabiani, J.-L. “La tradition latente : à propos des usages de la philosophie comtienne de la science dans l’histoire de la sociologie française”, in Id., (ed.) *Le Goût de l’enquête. Pour Jean-Claude Passeron*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2001, pp. 389-416.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, on 11 April 2022, translated by Kate
McNaughton with the support of Cairn.info. Published in booksandideas.net, 23
April 2024