

Societies of the Possible

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Abstract. This chapter proposes a view of societies as ‘societies of the possible’ in the sense of communities that foster a plurality of positions and perspectives and are open to alternative futures. And yet, there are multiple forces also within society that strive towards imposing sameness and pre-determined futures. These forces are embodied, among others, by totalitarian regimes. But, in the same way as totalitarianism invites resistance, the impossible is often met with laughter, wonder, and hope. Examples are offered from Romanian history and the argument is made that the ongoing struggle against the impossible is what keeps societies moving forward.

Keywords: possible, societies of the possible, humor, wonder, hope, Romania

The possible is a category intrinsically linked to human existence. It designates everything that lies beyond ‘what is’ within our immediate experience of the world. In other words, it refers to conceiving alternatives for the present state of affairs (‘what could be’), anticipating the future (‘what is to come’), reimagining the past (‘what could have been’), and discovering presumed impossibilities (‘what is not and might never be’). In many ways, these kinds of explorations are defining for humans as a species that have developed complex symbolic cultures and, with them, cultivated new possibilities for thought, action, and being (Glăveanu, 2020a). Key among these possibilities is the act of becoming aware of the possible itself and, more than this, of striving towards it. We are not only able to think of ways that help us escape our current condition and change it, but we actively pursue such transformations. As humans, we are often compelled to envision the world differently than it is and made to actualize its different possibilities, while being delighted by any opportunities to engage in acts of wonder, imagination, and creativity.

In this chapter, I will argue that living in society is both the trigger and the end point of our exploration of the possible and that human societies themselves are, at all times, ‘societies of the possible’. What is meant by this is the basic fact that society, for as structured as it certainly is, remains an open-ended project for all the individuals and groups constituting it. This is not an idealistic view claiming that we can make of society everything we fancy, far from it. In fact, it is precisely because our actions are often so constrained by norms, values and institutions, that we are prompted to reflect on numerous social, economic and political (im)possibilities on a daily basis (Gruber, Clark, Klempe & Valsiner, 2014). The multiple challenges threatening our world at once – from the climate emergency to the rise of nationalism fueled by dangerous forms of misinformation and the loss and devastation brought about by COVID-19 – force us to reimagine our societies beyond what they are in order to go on living within them. Recognizing society as belonging to the

realm of the possible is thus not a luxury, nor is it a sign of wishful thinking – it's a necessity that ensures survival and, one would hope, leads to different paths of growth and development.

Most often, when the notions of possibility and society come together what springs to mind is a version of utopia or utopian-like reconstructions of the world. In this way, possibility is relegated to the realm of fantasy and the 'what is not and might never be' category, even if, in recent years, a growing literature has been arguing for the need to cultivate more realistic, concrete utopias (Wright, 2010; Archer, 2019). Possible societies are not inevitably placed on the border of the impossible. In fact, possibility finds a way of expressing itself within all societal exchanges, relations and institutions. Even if many of these expressions are small in scale and predictable in nature, they nonetheless give social life its improvised, open, almost playful character (Simmel, 1949). And it is within these 'micro-spaces' of possibility that we find the resources to imagine larger changes, to build utopias, big and small, and to truly enjoy the company of others. While not all these possibilities will end up benefiting us – and some might even be harmful or dangerous – their existence is what saves social life from being mechanistic and claustrophobic.

I will start the chapter by considering the deep links between possibility and sociability, then reflect on a few extreme cases for the notion that society is, indeed, the playground of human creativity and imagination. Examples from Romania way of life under a totalitarian regime, of unsuccessful attempts at social change and of witnessing ongoing corruption and injustices will be discussed, in turn. For each of these examples, it will be shown how the possible reasserts itself, even under the most constraining or disheartening circumstances, through the work of humor, wonder, and hope. In the end, reflections are offered on the theoretical and practical consequences of existing as members of societies of the possible.

Social possibilities, possible sociabilities

The crux of the theory of the possible this chapter builds on is a recognition of the fact that society is both the premise and outcome of possibility. In order to unpack this notion, we need to consider more closely what society consists of and what functions it serves. To begin with, societies across time and around the world present us with a set of norms, values and rules that regulate social relations and even relations with oneself. They impose limits and guide us towards specific courses of action that help individuals find a place within the wider social system. Second, all societies have developed methods to educate people, especially children, into becoming 'good' citizens (whether this means as active and engaged participants in public life or obedient and passive political actors). Practices of socialization show young people the range of possibilities they are given, depending on a series of personal and social characteristics, and signpost a series of impossibilities to be avoided. Finally, societies tend to be conservative in nature in the sense that they are often resistant to change, at least in the initial stages. Studies of the diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 2003) often point to a gradual adoption of new ideas and solutions that, in time, become accepted and start resisting further changes, in an ongoing cycle. Of course, there are historical times in which change is swift and revolutionary but, even then, there is a strong ambivalence towards the new.

In all these instances, society seems to either restrict possibility or, at least, to firmly guide it. But it is also the case that without society, there would be no possibility to begin with. This is because, at its core, social life is marked by difference and differentiation. For as homogenous as some parts of society are in terms of socio-economic status, upbringing and worldview, there will always be differences between people, between self and other (Marková, 2003), that lead to a variety of perspectives. It is these perspectives and the relations between them – accord as well as clashes – that open up a space of possibility for all the actors involved. Perspectives, in this context, define our relation to the world and ‘construct’ it for us in a specific manner. For example, following a Marxist perspective makes people sensitive to power struggle and class conflict within society. Or holding the perspective that teachers know best can make educators less welcoming of student contributions in class. Of fundamental importance for the possible is the fact that we are never trapped within singular perspectives but can and do often ‘move’ between different positions and points of view in ways that expand our understanding of the situation we are in. To return to our examples, a Marxist might not agree with capitalists, but he or she can still grasp their perspective on the world and, in doing so, find unique ways to counter it. Teachers are necessarily confronted with their students’ perspectives and, in the best of cases, use them to enrich their own teaching and gain new insights. Ultimately, it is the diversity of positions and perspectives within the social world that makes both these possibility-enhancing acts, and many more, ‘possible’.

The ability to re-position ourselves and to move between positions – in physical, social and symbolic terms – allows us to diversify our own perspectives and, therefore, ways of relating to the world. This is where possibilities rest, in fact, in the difference between self and other, between what is and what could be, between dominant and alternatives positions and views. It is human society that not only brings together such diversity and contributes to it – e.g., by creating and orchestrating various positions – but creates opportunities for exchanges of perspective. These start in early childhood, in the way play and games are designed to help children alternate between various roles, and continues throughout life, in how education, the workplace and family life are organized. In practice, the perspectives of others are often ignored, denied or wrongly assumed so not all interactions can be expected to successfully open new horizons for the actors involved. But the mere possibility of seeing the world differently as a result of living together with other people is always present and it constitutes the basis for more visible acts of imagination and creativity.

The sociocultural argument, thus, is that our social existence is at the root of agency and creativity, despite the long-held belief that these are purely ‘individual’ properties or that creative individuals need to fight society and culture in order to express themselves. A diversity of positions and perspectives represent the necessary but not sufficient conditions for creativity, there are other social and material conditions that need to be in place in order to turn this potential into reality. But the fact remains that, without this diversity in the first place, there would be no possibility for novelties to emerge. Conversely, society itself depends on the emergence of possibility that allows for its continuity, through constant renewal, and its transformation. However, these transformations and the possibilities they open are not desirable, at least from the perspective of dominant groups in

society. The dynamics that ensue reveal a close interplay between possibility and impossibility, a relationship I go on to explore next with the help of some examples from the Romanian context.

Totalitarianism and laughter

There is little as constraining as living under a totalitarian regime. If the possible thrives under diversity, including diversity of perspectives, dictatorships fear both. Throughout history, totalitarian regimes started by targeting the most marginal members of society, the ones that could potentially hold radically different points of view, and tried to eliminate them. In order to create the utopia of a totalitarian state, be it fascist or communist, sameness had to prevail. Everyone who had the 'right' background, or position in society, was allowed the privilege of being the same as everyone else. Society was hollowed of its dynamism and diversity under the pretense of equality and of following the 'common good'. The only possibility accepted was that of total victory against the 'enemies of the people', invariable those who thought differently than the ruling class.

It is easy therefore to conclude that totalitarianism is the antithesis of the possible just as it is the enemy of creativity (Montuori, 2005). It is its intrinsic anti-pluralism that makes it so, eliminating possibilities of thinking or being different. And yet, totalitarian regimes always inspire acts of resistance and cultivate the revolutions they fear most. By going against the sense of possibility intrinsic to human types of society, dictatorships invite opposition and, with it, the imagination of the 'world as it is not' and the 'world as it might become'.

Romania's close to 40 years of communism illustrate well the dynamic above. Decades of oppression were followed by a relative openness under Ceaușescu, when Romania became less aligned with the Soviet Union (for instance, it refused to follow fellow members of the Warsaw pact in the invasion of Czechoslovakia), while continuing to suppress freedoms and, towards the end, imposing strict restrictions, including on food (e.g., through rationing). Ceaușescu's rule famously ended with his capture and execution during the Romanian revolution of '89, the only 'bloody revolution' during the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. A revolution led, as it is often the case, by young people who craved for a different kind of life and future and all the possibilities embedded within them. But it would be mistaken to believe that the possible was 'reinstated' in Romanian society through the revolution; in fact, it had never left it even during the harshest years of oppression. Not only was it the case that different groups in the country, especially intellectuals, continued to resist the regime, sometimes at a high personal cost, but it persisted in the everyday, though simple acts of using humor to criticize the dictator and the Party.

There are many jokes that circulated at the time that are still remembered today, used to reflect on how much has changed within society and, at the same time, how much remained the same. Some of these jokes captured the surreal, maddening aspects of living under communism and the burning desire to escape it. An imaginary dialogue goes: *'Why did you end up in the mental hospital?'* *'Because I tried to flee the country'* *'But then they should have put you in jail'* *'No, I tried to flee to the Soviet Union'*. Or, poking fun at the propaganda machine that was constantly aimed at making Western countries look undesirable: *'Capitalism is on the brink of abyss'* *'What is*

it doing there?’ ‘Looking down at us...’. Work was especially valued during communism even if, in reality, it was expected of all classes outside the ruling one. *‘Long and frequent breaks, that’s the key to success’*, the saying went (a maxim that rhymes in Romanian). Most of all, Security forces were the specter that frightened most Romanians into submission. Operating as a secret police, it was never known who would be listening to private conversations and reporting them. This created a culture of silence that was yet acknowledged, again, through humor. *‘Let’s not talk about politics because we don’t know if you or I work for the Security’*. In the same vein: *‘the pessimist says, “it’s so bad, it couldn’t be any worse!”*, the optimist replies *“yes it could, yes it could”’*.

By its nature, humor belongs to the realm of the possible – it allows us to take some distance from the world ‘as is’, to imagine it differently, and to find the gap between the two comical. There is much more power in humor than we usually give it credit. This is why, for communists and other totalitarians, laughing at the dictator or the Party was a crime or, at least, the opportunity to discover other punishable crimes. The crime is that of revealing possibilities in the face of oppression, of cultivating a plurality of views in the face of imposed sameness.

Collective wonder and social change

The path to societal transformation can start with humor or, more generally, the act of challenging dominant assumptions about society; in the previous example, this was the legitimacy and authority of the Communist Party in post-World War II Romania. But there are other phenomena that help move forward an individual or groups’ exploration of the possible. Key among these is wonder, a phenomenon that designates our propensity to question the taken for granted and to de-familiarize the familiar (see Glăveanu, 2020b). In moments of wonder, we reconsider what we thought we knew about ourselves, others and the world, and imagine ways in which they could all be different. This can have a destabilizing effect and, ultimately, it was for cultivating wonder in the Athenian youth that Socrates was sentenced to drink hemlock. And yet, wondering allows us to question society at a deeper level than humor does because it doesn’t have a final point (or a final punchline). Wonder is a truly open-ended process in which certainties and illusions of knowing are being gradually dispelled without being replaced with any definitive conclusion or universal knowledge. In wonder, we become used to dwelling in the unknown and to experiencing not knowing as a virtue rather than an unsatisfactory, frustrating moment that needs to be overcome.

But how exactly do we wonder? And what is the relation between wonder and possibility? A distinction is often made in the literature between ‘wondering at’ and ‘wondering about’. The first captures the more passive element of surprise in which the person encounters either something unfamiliar or considers what is familiar in a new and surprising way. Accidental discoveries often place us in the position to wonder at and, in those moments, we can be captivated by what we encounter, sometimes becoming overwhelmed by it (a feature that demonstrates the relation between wonder and awe). Wondering about, on the other hand, is a much more active, directive process in which we imagine different alternatives and play with various explanations. It is closer to curiosity in the sense of trying to answer an unexpected question but, in this case, without craving

for a particular resolution (what is usually referred to as satisfying one's curiosity). These two facets, the more passive and the more active, awe-like and curiosity-like, are not disconnected from each other and it is their relation to the possible that brings them together. Wondering at makes us aware of new and unexpected possibilities; wondering about helps us examine and expand them.

Traditionally it is assumed that the experience of wonder is a highly individual one (Parsons, 1969). In the end, the person who is the 'wonderer' is as important as what he or she is wondering at or about, the 'wonderous'. Individuals often wonder about how the society they live in could be different and what might be needed to change it. But groups also engage in this process, and in many ways, this amplifies individual instances of wonder. When wondering together, we become attuned to others' questions, doubts and emotions in a way that allows us to jointly discover new possibilities and try to bring them about. This is the classic example of social movements which are never driven by a single individual, even if our theories of leadership encourage us always to look for one. Social change necessarily involves the collective and this collective is animated by visions of the future and the possible that require, among others, a strong propensity for shared wonder.

A concrete example of this dynamic comes once more from Romania and anti-corruption protests of 2017-2019. A reaction to the ruling party's attempt to pardon certain crimes and modify the Penal Code, these protests have been the largest since the anti-communist revolution of '89. Through them, a new generation of young people found its voice and broke the apathy that paralyzed the Romanian civil society for much of the transition period (in this case, the transition to democracy, one accompanied by more economic hardship and deepening social inequality). In January 2017, with temperatures well below zero, thousands of Romanians started gathering in the center of Bucharest and, afterwards, in cities across the country. The demonstrations continued for many months and became what is known as the "rezist" movement, resisting a corrupt government in both offline and online spaces. One of the most captivating aspects of these large-scale protests has to do with how people got spontaneously organized and how they started to improvise, on the spot, slogans and new forms of activism (including using music, light and puppet shows). Some of the memorable slogans of the day included "Make politicians afraid again" and "Make Rahova and Jilava great again" (where the two are well-known prisoners), "The situation is so bad that even introverts came out to protest", and "I was not born in '89 but now I am here". These speak to the deep engagement of protesters with history and with contemporary events, using humor at times to underline the seriousness of the situation. They are also examples of collective wonder, acts in which multiple individuals come together to reject a corrupt and unequal future and imagine new ones. Futures that their parents hoped for in 1989 and their children continue to depend on today.

Disenchantment and hope

The aftermath of the 2017 protests was not exactly what many would have hoped. Indeed, the changes to the Penal Code were recalled and the justice minister resigned. But the protesters didn't manage to topple the government or create the radical change they desperately wanted to see. In the years that have passed since then, the political scene has changed and there are some encouraging

signs for the future, including through the creation of parties that aim to tackle corruption and to build deeper bonds with the Romanian diaspora. But change is slow, as it often is in society.

This enforces a certain state of disenchantment with the social and political life and of feeling dispossessed. Particularly in a place like Romania, it has been disheartening to notice how, despite three decades having passed since the fall of communism, the country didn't grow much richer, the standard of life continues to be relatively low (one of the lowest in the European Union), and society become more unequal rather than less, with a small group of people controlling the economic destiny of the state. Yes, there is much more freedom in Romania, including freedom of the press, but it is accompanied by a growing wave of misinformation and division, like in many other parts of Europe and the world. The dominance of the Communist Party has been replaced by the 'oligarchs' and 'moguls' of today, oppressing the majority, again, this time with new means.

What seemed like an open future in '89, full of wonder and possibility, gradually started to close down and follow the obligatory path of a neoliberal, market economy from which few can really benefit. As a young boy growing up at the time of the revolution, I remember well the 'transition' years and the attempts, by many, to conquer the brave new world that materialized in front of them. Some had opened small shops, often using parts of their apartment to do this, others tried to participate more actively in politics. The first were soon wiped out by the big supermarket chains that arrived in the country in the early 90s. The second discovered that, while the leading figures of the Communist Party had been removed, the 'new' generation of politicians usually came from the second and third ranks of the same Party. This explains the high levels of distrust in politics that have characterized the Romanian society since communist times and the rather pessimistic outlook on the future. Even as things change, they remain the same. All the promised possibilities, including through EU and NATO membership, are yet to bear fruit.

How does a sense of possibility last in societies that have consistently experienced hardships and oppression? How can places like Romania and, beyond it, other countries and communities of people who suffered through considerably more marginalization, exclusion and poverty, still be thought of as 'societies of the possible'? One of the key possibility-related processes that help people go on even in the case of failure or, at least, perceived failure, is hope. Hope here is not understood as an unsubstantiated belief in a brighter future or as a replacement for action. On the contrary, in the tradition outlined by Rebecca Solnit (2004), to hope means to envision possibilities that motivate one to act. Hope is the antidote against apathy and political disenchantment. It is an emotion that keeps possibilities alive when humor and wonder, imagination and creativity have reached their limit. It represents the light in the dark when all other lights are out of sight.

In Romania, hope leads young leaders to challenge the status quo and initiate new parties and forms of activism. It is also what brings together, in a state of collective wonder, large masses to return back, again and again, and protest, creatively, against injustice and corruption. Many of them say they do so for the future, not for themselves. They have the hope that, if not them, then their children will live under a different system, in a country that can take pride in its history and its present. The hope that the society they build, together, firmly belongs to the realm of the possible.

Concluding thoughts

I started the chapter by defining the possible as a state of plurality of perspectives. By engaging with it, we become aware of and are able to explore alternatives to ‘what is’ in the form of ‘what could be’, ‘what is to come’, ‘what could have been’ and ‘what might never be’. This human capacity is both enabled by and enables, in turn, social life. Our societies are, at all times, societies of the possible in the sense that they foster a diversity of positions and perspectives. At least potentially, that is. This is because different societies have different ways of dealing with plurality. Totalitarian states strive towards sameness and the suppression of difference, especially difference in perspective, and they oftentimes employ violent means to achieve this aim. Any group that tries to promote social change meets resistance, including in democratic states. Social movements need to capture the imagination, ‘the heart and mind’ of people, in order to mobilize them. And this is a difficult task especially in those circumstances in which civil society is disenchanted with the political class and disappointed by decades of hardship, injustice and oppression. And yet, even in these challenging contexts, societies never stop striving towards the possible and the future. They do so, as shown here, through humor, wonder and hope, among other possibility-enabling processes.

Some brief examples from Romania, my country of origin, have been offered to illustrate these points. But there are many, many more examples to be considered, from the struggle against Nazism in the 20th century and neo-fascism today, to the Arab Spring revolutions and, more recently, the MeToo, Black Lives Matter and climate emergency protests. Each of the people who participate in these movements puts safety at risk and does so willingly. One might argue at this point that Nazis and communists also had a strong vision of the future, in the same way in which white supremacists and xenophobes have one today. There is, though, a fundamental difference – these extreme activists don’t fight for plurality or an open future for everyone to participate in. They advance an agenda in which their perspective takes precedence vis à vis all others, in which the world ‘as is’ imagined by them eliminates any other world that ‘could be’ or ‘could have been’. The forces driving the possible in society always come against those that see all other futures, except their chosen one, as impossible. And this too is part of what defines a human society and what pushes possibilities further. Without the specter of the impossible, how would we know what there is to do next, to make fun of, to wonder about and, most of all, to hope for?

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