

Possibility studies: A manifesto

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There is an audacity in focusing on the possible in an age of major personal and societal impossibilities. At the time of writing (March 2022), the world is still struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, a horrific war is being waged by Russia in Ukraine, and the climate emergency is only intensifying. From the interdiction of quarantine to the forced migration of millions, from post-truth politics to the consequences of extreme weather phenomena, our reality reminds us that the positive futures imagined for the 21st century are in question. Or, at least, that we paradoxically live, at once, in the best and the worst of times (Wijnberg, 2019). And yet, as we go against such formidable constraints, we can still rely on the quintessentially human capacity to hope, to imagine and to envision new possibilities for environmental action, justice and peace. The possible re-emerges as an organising category in our lives and our thinking not despite but *because* of living through the seemingly impossible and unimaginable.

But what exactly is the possible? The dictionary definition (Oxford University Press, n.d.) indicates two main meanings, one that is tamer and associates it with what is feasible or achievable, and another that is bolder and ventures into the space of the conceivable, regardless of whether it can be put into practice or not. No matter whether we are talking about realistic or unrealistic possibilities, at the heart of this notion stands a commitment to the idea that the world is not yet finished, that it is in a continuous process of becoming, and that this becoming – for as much as we might anticipate it – is never entirely predictable. Beyond ‘what currently is’, there is room for ‘what is not yet, but will be’,

‘what might be’ and ‘what can never be’. And the realm of the possible doesn’t stop with the future, it also helps us imagine ‘what might have been’, in the past, and what exists ‘as if’ in the present. To engage with the possible means to infuse ‘what is’ with new perspectives and, in doing so, to radically transform it (Gaggioli, 2020; Glăveanu, 2020a).

Possibility Studies as a new and emergent multi- and trans-disciplinary field is dedicated to the study of this shift of focus from being to becoming, from what is to what could be, from deterministic accounts of the world to agentic, generative and open-ended understandings. We human *beings* live ‘amphibious’ lives – at once in the realm of the actual and the possible. By foregrounding hope, imagination, agency and creativity, we can get to fully appreciate what it means to be human in a world that oftentimes resists our needs, expectations, and aspirations. Possibility Studies invites us to consider how people, cultures and nature are transformed by becoming aware of, engaged with and active within an expanded field of psychological, social, economic, political, material, technological and artistic possibilities.

There are several developments, in scientific research and in society that prepare the ground for Possibility Studies. The first refers to an increased

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interest in all those phenomena that help individuals and collectives to discover and explore possibilities. This interest is certainly historical, going back millennia. It includes old interrogations about human choice and the existence of free will (Irwin, 1992), as well as the nature of the imagination (Brann, 1991). Jumping through time, we can find several precursors to today's fascination with possibility and the future, most importantly in Futures Studies, an earlier concern that became formalised as a field in the 1960s in the context of technological hopes and Cold War fears (Gabor, 1963; Kahn, 1962). But there has been little systematic investigation, at least of an empirical nature, into the processes leading to our engagement with the possible until recently. Over the past few decades, fields like creativity research (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010), organisational innovation (Anderson et al., 2014), design (Cross, 1999) and imagination studies (Abraham, 2020) have been flourishing, with new topics rapidly emerging – for example, wonder (Glăveanu, 2020b), awe (Chirico et al., 2021) and serendipity (Ross & Copeland, 2022). In the meantime, profound societal transformations animate our collective imagination from the new Space Race (this time led by billionaires) to the Extinction Rebellion, a movement based on civil disobedience led primarily by young people. There is a sense of urgency to many of these changes, a sense that we have perhaps a last chance to do things differently, do them better. And the scientific community, across disciplines, is rallying behind this call, proposing that we make the future our guiding principle in sociology (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013), anthropology (Appadurai, 2013), psychology (Gergen, 2015), engineering (Olson, 2016) and numerous other natural and social sciences, arts and humanities.

The present editorial, inaugural for the journal of *Possibility Studies and Society*, serves as an open invitation to think and research further the nature of the possible, and especially to create links across disciplines and across science and society when it comes to this topic. It is structured as a Manifesto in that it proposes 15 assertions (in no particular order) that will hopefully be added to, nuanced, developed further, or challenged by new scholarship within Possibility Studies, much of it to be published in this new journal. These assertions are not meant to be normative convictions or absolute principles but starting points for dialogue,

debate and reflection. They grow out of past and present work on possibility and represent an attempt to imagine its future.

1. ***The possible is distributed.*** In contrast to common individual-centric, mind-based approaches to the possible, the 'locus' of possibility is the relational space of action and interaction between person and world. Imagining possibilities, creating opportunities to enact them, and changing our understanding of what is possible are all interactional achievements. They require embodied minds, other people, objects, places, and more generally the existence of a natural, social and cultural environment. Even when possibilities are imagined by single individuals, awareness of what is possible and its enactment take place within the evolving interdependence between person and context.
2. ***The possible is intertwined with the actual.*** One of the oldest dichotomies in this area is the one between 'what is' (the actual) and 'what could be' (the possible). This distinction, while analytically useful, can be misleading as it tends to suggest that possibilities only exist in our imagination and, the moment they are acted upon, turn into something 'real'. In fact, the possible and the actual are intertwined if we consider them temporally – they continuously feed into and transform each other through the course of action. The dialogical tension between the actual and the possible is our starting point for theoretical development and empirical exploration.
3. ***The possible depends on constraints.*** Related to the two assertions above, a direct consequence is that our engagement with possibility is, at all times, constrained (e.g., by what is, by previous imaginations of what could be, by their enactment). This doesn't mean that we cannot envision radical possibilities but that constraints – themselves never fully fixed in time and space – are enablers of our relationship with what is possible, both in its mundane and extraordinary forms. In a similar vein, encountering

impossibilities does not necessarily curtail the possible. It can even be a source of inspiration, a trigger for the need to overcome our current boundaries.

4. ***The possible is mediated.*** Our relationship to the possible is grounded in action in and on the world. This also means that it is mediated by a variety of material and symbolic tools, including a range of technologies. As such, human culture is both the origin and outcome of our engagement with the possible. Cultural processes are, in this sense, helping us navigate, as individuals and communities, the relationship between what is, what is not yet, what could be, and what will never be. Technological developments, to take one example of cultural mediation, are often used as windows towards possible futures.
5. ***The possible is grounded in difference.*** The possible emerges in human experience whenever there is a multitude of perspectives available for individual, groups and societies to draw upon in understanding themselves and their environment. Differences and the multiplicities they ensure are a necessary – but not sufficient – condition for engaging the possible (this condition is not sufficient given that, although we live in worlds already marked by difference, we often ignore this aspect or detest it for a variety of reasons). Minds and societies defined by diversity and dialogue are, consequently, open to new possibilities in ways that monological, fixated, and totalitarian worlds and mindsets are not. Last but not least, discourses about human possibility should not be Eurocentric or Western centric but actively invite experiences and ideas that grow out of decolonisation as a position from which we can actively reimagine self, other, and world.
6. ***Experiences of the possible are multifaceted.*** Becoming aware of what is possible and comparatively assessing various possibilities goes beyond cognitive – or, for that matter, neurological – processes. The possible is not merely a mental representation or way of processing information; it involves the entire being and it especially has a strong motivational and emotional dynamic. Experiences of the possible are infused by affect, from hopefulness and curiosity to anxiety, regret, and excitement about new possibilities. They also follow a narrative structure in which choices and opportunities are rendered intelligible by placing them within wider stories of who we are and who we are becoming.
7. ***Possibility related phenomena should be studied as systems.*** Experiences of the possible depend on more than individuals; they require a wide ecosystem that includes human and non-human actors and their entanglement. Humans don't always occupy a central position in this system as objects and material spaces can guide the discovery of new possibilities (e.g., new affordances) and enable their enactment. Agency, considered systemically, is best defined as co-agency since the discovery and exploration of the possible depends on the relationship between person and environment rather than any of the two in isolation. Nature is as important as culture in unpacking the dynamic of the possible.
8. ***Possibility related phenomena are developmental.*** Our system-based engagement with the possible takes place over time and describes unique temporal trajectories. These trajectories can be identified at multiple levels. In phylogenetic terms, each species tries to exploit the macro-possibilities embedded in interactions with its given natural environment. Sociogenetically, long histories define what is possible and impossible for various groups within society. Ontogenetically, different ages and stages of development define their own sphere of (im)possibility. Last but not least, microgenetic interactions reveal the moment to moment interplay between the actual and possible.
9. ***Experiences of the possible transform the self.*** The fact that humans can pretend things are not what they are, reimagine the past, envision multiple futures and conceive the impossible, are all transformative

experiences. It could even be argued that we emerge as human selves because of our engagement with an expanded field of possibility and because of the consequences this type of engagement has for our identity, self-efficacy, and self-presentation. As beings dwelling within a world that is at once actual and possible, the human condition involves a radical open-endedness and orientation towards the future that change how we are and how we understand ourselves.

- 10. *Experiences of the possible foster mental health.*** While mental health and well-being have a wide range of determinants, the capacity to envision a multitude of possible solutions to life's problems, and the confidence that some of these can be achieved, is a precondition for both. Conversely, a sense of insurmountable obstacles and lack of (positive) possibilities can be a source of depression, anxiety, and activate pathological states. It is not accidental, in this context, that the inability to reimagine one's life is a primary indicator of traumatic experiences, and its reversal represents a key sign of recovering and, in some cases, of entering a new phase of post-traumatic growth.
- 11. *The possible should not be romanticised.*** While many of the foregoing assertions seem to suggest that human explorations of the possible lead to a variety of positive outcomes, from personal to societal, we cannot underestimate the darker sides of this engagement. For example, the discourse of possibility can become a burden when normatively imposed; the belief that one can be or achieve anything, enforced by cultures oriented towards youthfulness, wealth, and success, can result in depression or burnout when these expectations are not met. Rumination about how the past could have been different can be a sign of depression and the obsessive exploration of negative possible futures can lead to generalised anxiety. Equally, the drive towards maximising short-sighted possibilities can guide profiteering from environmental exploitation, war, and societal injustice.

- 12. *An ethics of possibility is imperative.*** Related to the above, we need a sustained ethical reflection on the scope, nature, and limits of our engagement with the possible and the consequences this engagement has for ourselves, for others, for society, and for the planet. Being in the position to envision a course of action and its alternatives and to evaluate which possibilities should be acted upon and which should be disregarded requires us to adopt a moral stance. The responsibility that comes with agentic choice needs to be accompanied by practices of moral deliberation and the realisation that we all impact each other's sense of what, how and why something is possible.
- 13. *The possible is political.*** The construction of norms, values, and ideologies around who, in society, is expected or has the right to discover new possibilities and, conversely, who is denied such opportunities is a political act. In fact, power relations within and between groups are a key determinant in the dynamic of the possible and the imposition of impossibility. The recognition of some individuals and groups as 'holding potential' – and the rejection of this status for other individuals and groups – has decisive consequences for nature, human agency, opportunity to succeed, and the opportunity to enjoy a dignified life. Importantly, the struggle against the rejection of possibility is also a political act, one that can lead to resistance, resilience, and the generation of new societal alternatives.
- 14. *The study of the possible requires diverse and creative methodologies.*** Research into possibility related phenomena is intrinsically diverse in view of its questions and theories, yet surprisingly uniform when it comes to methods. In many fields, quantitative methods are preferred and the emphasis is placed on psychometric testing (of possibility related traits) and experimental designs (changing possibility related states). Other disciplines use in-depth qualitative investigations oftentimes grounded in the discursive or phenomenological traditions. What is required is a trans-disciplinary

approach: a wider set of methods, a more consistent dialogue across methodologies, as well as new and creative methodological choices that do justice to the complexity of the phenomena under study.

- 15. *Pedagogies of the possible are an educational necessity.*** Traditional forms of education, focused on standardised goals, uniformity in teaching, and sameness of outcomes, are increasingly recognised as not suitable for the challenges (and impossibilities) of today. Living within uncertain, complex and difficult environments, defined by a fast pace of change, our responsibility is to educate individuals and communities who can envision and enact new possibilities in a reflective, proactive, and ethical manner. Twenty-first century education needs to rise to the challenge of helping students and teachers go beyond the world ‘as it was’ and ‘as it is’ and enrich it with imaginations of how it ‘can and should be’.

Possibility Studies and Society is a journal dedicated to scholarly dialogues about the 15 assertions above and other emerging points of interest and debate within the community of Possibility Studies researchers and practitioners. The ethos of this journal, mirroring the field itself, is explicitly multi- and trans-disciplinary, welcoming contributions about the possible that cut across the psychological, material, social, cultural, historical, technological, and political. As the official outlet for the Possibility Studies Network, this publication welcomes submissions on all possibility related topics including, but not reduced to, creativity, imagination, improvisation, innovation, invention, agency, pretend play, wonder, awe, serendipity, counterfactuals, the future, anticipation, social change, utopias and dystopias. While some of these rich areas of study have their own dedicated journals, there are few spaces in which researchers can read, reflect on, and respond to the work of others, particularly when this work is situated in another discipline (Forsyth, 2020). By reframing these topics in terms of our engagement with the possible, we can develop more comprehensive theoretical frameworks, complex research

designs, and sound solutions for the many challenges of today. This dialogue is expected to increase the collaboration between psychologists, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, classicists, designers, educators, political scientists, organisational researchers, ergonomists, engineers and artists (e.g. Gardner, 1988; Kaufman et al., 2017; Martin, 2007; Masini, 2001; Miller, 2016).

The 15 principles outlined in this editorial serve as a first general map for this emerging field but, as with any map, they orient without ever capturing the entire territory. And this territory in particular is developing fast, accumulating new examples, questions and even potential challenges for each one of the assertions above. The present Manifesto for Possibility Studies serves a dialogical purpose – to start a conversation, from the very first issues, about the antecedents, processes and consequences of our individual and collective engagement with the possible. In the spirit of cultivating possibility, my invitation is to take the 15 principles as a point of departure. Where this journey will take us, individually and as a community, inside and outside the pages of this new journal, remains to be seen, but it is certainly exciting to contemplate.

In the spirit of this invitation, we are dedicating the first three editions of *Possibility Studies and Society* to essays written by leading scholars from across disciplines and across the globe. The contributors kindly accepted an invitation to write short essays about what the possible means to them and what they envision for possibility studies. The present Manifesto has been shared with the authors as a point of reference, without the expectation that individual essay will comment on the principles above. The third edition ends with an epilogue written by the journal’s senior editor team. Taken together, these inaugural issues offer a refreshing range of views and bring up a set of new dimensions that we hope to discuss and expand through the years to come.

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