The possibility of possibility: Between ethnography and social theory

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Abstract

This paper considers how 'the possibility of possibility' as freedom of choice and audacious obligation towards newness found in philosophical works of such scholars as Søren Kierkegaard and Michel Serres is tempered by socio-historical circumstance. Ethnographic material from Scotland and Greece demonstrates contrasting ways that possibilities are impacted by the various timespaces that open or foreclose pathways to the future. Possibility shapes notions of the Self and Society since people are propelled to (in)action by way of recurring and reinterpreted pasts, are pulled through futural horizons in present-day practice or become stuck on the threshold of becoming. In the context of the independence movement in Scotland, possibility plays an active role in political life of independence campaigners with a feedback loop between past-present-future providing momentum to actualise the possible. In Greece, a decade of crisis has foreclosed previously possible futures with people feeling stuck in a repeating spin-cycle where horizons of the possible cannot be crossed. The ethnographic examples showcase how the multiplicities of human life affect the possibility of possibility and how visions of the elsewhere, elsewhen, and otherwise emerge in more or less 'positive' scenarios.

Introduction: Into the possible

It is the possibility of possibility, Søren Kierkegaard tells us, that leads to the somewhat paradoxical condition of feeling dizzy with anxiety yet having the pulsating desire to jump into the unknown. Torn at the seams, caught in an event horizon, fear holds us back while an all-consuming curiosity pushes us ever further towards the edge, traversing the threshold of creative destruction.[1] Possibility, for Kierkegaard (1980), is indistinguishably entwined with freedom of choice, the realisation that the individual can act to change their world (this fork in the road is what the Ancient Greeks termed *krisis* (crisis), from *krino*, the time of decision-making, or of judgement). But only those educated in successfully navigating the threshold where potential is actualised will get sucked up in the vertigo of newness and innovation; for others the cliff-edge represents a plunge into darkness.

To create new history, to branch out from established knowledge onto a trajectory of

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symbiotic novelty is, for Serres (2020), the duty of the audacious pioneer, an adventurer in the mould of Jules Verne. The terrifying assaults of anxiety are fraught with danger, but can also awaken the senses to possibilities beyond. To step over the cliff-edge, to allow oneself to 'unravel', is to embrace possibility; 'the elation of inventive discovery' (Serres 2012, p. 138). The pioneer can, Kierkegaard says, destroy the status quo to create 'new and original forms of living' (May 2015, p. 40); but Serres' (2014) reasons, 'many fear the obligation to invent' (p. xiii) and they get stranded on the sandbar of indecision and stagnation.

Heidegger (1962) goes further in claiming possibility is not merely human obligation but is inherently part of being. In constant movement through a series of 'nows' and 'not-yets', Heidegger's Dasein *is* being-possible. Being is the actuality of the *possible as possible* while death represents the *possibility of the impossibility* of any existence at all (Sinclair, 2015). Moving through time, pressing forward into the future in what Heidegger calls 'projection', being-possible is a naturalised state. Dasein always will understand itself in terms of possibilities as the very essence of being – once a being-possible is realised, Dasein moves towards the next possibility of its own being (Heidegger, 1962, p. 325). If Dasein is its possibility at every moment in time, then cultural institutions, environmental constraints, and historical context form merely the background noise to existence itself, with the embodied human capacity to be responsible for future-production clearly foregrounded (Heidegger, 1962, p. 185, see Massumi, 2002).[2]

So we find ourselves with a double bind. If the aforementioned theorists (and many more besides) are to be believed, there is a human desire, perhaps even an obligation, to create new history, but with something always holding us back. To jump or stay put? How far to plunge or push on? Will the bungee unravel or snap back? On which wall should we aim our Platonic projections? In ethnographic work on future orientations, hopes and aspirations, the philosophical musings on possibilities and novel innovations are tempered by 'real world' situations – the constraints of history, politics, nature and technology. For example, as a rebuke to cosmopolitanism's Kantian humanistic theories of building individual lifeworlds through selectively engaging with social relations, cultural domains and bureaucratic systems, one could posit the question, 'Are the possibilities for a black slave born in a Southern state in the 1800s the same as a professor at a UK higher education institution in 2022?'[3] While a seemingly ridiculous – and definitely crass – comparison, it does illustrate the limited scope of philosophies of rational choice and cosmopolitanism's tunnel vision on personal freedoms that posits the human born outside of socio-historical systems with a 'birthright' to all possibilities of becoming (cf. Rapport, 2012, 2019). It would seem that the opportunity to be audacious, to embrace obligations to create novel futures and the freedom to author individual life-worlds must be discussed within some socio-historical boxes. It might also raise a hand to Heidegger's constant movement in continuous becoming, suggesting human responsibility for future-production has its restrictions.[4] Further, 21st-century anthropologists must also be wary of the tendency of neoliberal institutions to label histories, spaces and social domains as empty, blank or void – the historical erasure usually bypasses the long-standing impact of settler colonialism or social inequality. As Ahmann (2022, p. 260) aptly puts it, some 'efforts towards the possible must grapple with some concrete limitations'.

In thinking about the possibilities for shaping individual and collective futures, Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight have argued for considering the structures and affects that 'orient' people's practices in the present. The time-spaces of one's existence have their own teleoaffective structures; simply, a bundle of affects and relations that define an era and encourage people to individually or collectively act in certain ways and towards particular ends (Bryant & Knight, 2019). On an epochal scale,

a Time of Brexit, a Time of War in Eastern Europe or a Time of Emancipation may be laced with shared affects and futural momentums, offering possible pathways to becoming, while foreclosing others. At the individual level, times of mourning and celebration, ill health, financial frugality or career development frame trajectories for pursuing the possible. Capacities, faculties, and movements are partially determined by the teleoaffective structures of the timespace; the way we act on possibilities is steered by the likelihood of them being realised within bundles of socio-cultural-historical relations (Bryant & Knight, 2019, p. 111).

This short paper will pick at the seams of where ethnographic observation meets theory, considering the freedom of choice and audacious obligation towards newness found in philosophy and social theory within the socio-historical circumstances of our contemporary fieldsites of Scotland and Greece. For anthropologists, ethnographic fields throw up scenarios where possibilities are fearlessly imagined, embraced or defeated and shattered. Orientations of hope, anticipation, apathy and exhaustion operate within these timespaces. Speaking primarily to Vlad Glaveanu's nineth point in the positioning manifesto in the editorial to this journal, we show how possibility shapes notions of the Self and Society since people are propelled to (in)action by way of recurring and reinterpreted pasts, are pulled through futural horizons in present-day practice or become stuck on the threshold of becoming. In the context of the independence movement in Scotland, possibility plays an active role in political life of independence campaigners with a feedback loop between past-present-future providing momentum to actualise the possible. In Greece, a decade of crisis has foreclosed previously possible futures with people feeling stuck in a repeating spin-cycle where horizons of the possible cannot be crossed. Whereas in Scotland vibrant possibility drives forward utopian visions of an otherwise, in Greece possibility is held captive by socio-historical circumstance. The rhythms, scales, and affects of possibility are quite different in the two locations. 'Possibility', Heidegger (1962) writes, 'is the most primordial and the ultimate positive ontological determination' of being (p. 143).[5] The ethnographic cases showcase how the multiplicities of human life affect the possibility of possibility and how visions of the *elsewhere*, *elsewhen* and *otherwise* emerge in more or less 'positive' scenarios.

Scotland: Possibility as political hope

In 2014 Scotland held its first ever referendum on independence from the United Kingdom. Following the rise of the Scottish National Party (SNP) to power in the Scottish parliament, the then Conservative UK prime minister David Cameron agreed to hold a referendum on Scottish independence, hoping to ride out the wave of pro-independence politics within the Scottish parliament. It was a risky strategy that narrowly paid off, with the Scottish public voting 45% to 55% to remain part of the UK. Although the matter should have been put to rest (or so the UK government hoped), the independence referendum and subsequent tumultuous years in UK politics had quite the opposite effect in Scotland, having successfully presented an independent future as a space populated by hopeful possibility.

The SNP considers itself to be a civic nationalist party who argue in favour of independence for democratic – rather than historical – reasons (Manley, 2019, 2021). In 2014, this position led them to reject traditional historically-grounded nationalist narratives, re-framing instead their pro-independence message as one entirely concerned with Scotland's *future* possibilities. In place of narratives championing a return to a golden past, the SNP engaged with the possibilities of a golden future, encouraging the Scottish public to participate in the collective practice of imagining hopeful and hope-filled utopias: a green future in which Scotland leads the world in renewable energy; a wealthy future where Scotland follows Norway in North Sea oil extractions; a Scotland with no poverty, universal basic income, exemplary democratic practices; a Scotland with space

ports to rival those in California. The possibilities contained within future alternatives of an independent Scotland fuelled the pro-independence movement.

In Manley's extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Edinburgh, the 2014 referendum is recalled by SNP supporters as 'dizzying', 'exhilarating' and even at times 'a little scary, but in a good way'; their actions opening up hopeful possibilities by destroying the status quo in order to create Kierkegaardian 'new and original forms of living'. In contrast to the response to the Greek economic crisis discussed below, pro-independence supporters in Scotland were *moved into political action* by this opening of futural possibility, the potential rupture and subsequent political fallout inciting hope, rather than anxiety, through its clouded unknowable state (Manley, 2019). When balanced on the referendum's cliff-edge, not knowing whether to hold on to the familiar political status quo, or plunge into the unknown futures associated with independence, pro-independence supporters embraced the vertiginous, the potential rupture, which inspired in them the sense of audacious discovery mentioned by Serres.

Eight years after the 2014 independence referendum, this approach to the unknown future of an independent Scotland has never been stronger, with pro-independence supporters having found renewed momentum following the 2016 Brexit vote and the subsequent tumultuous negotiations. As the SNP demands a new independence referendum by the end of 2023, pro-independence activists are once again moved into political action by the horizon of hopeful possibility that is the imagined post-referendum Scotland. However, their sense of possibility is now deeply entwined with the idea of freedom of choice, a prominent argument of SNP members being that 'Scotland should get the government they voted for'. Released from the laws and powers of Westminster, Scotland would be free, they argue, to fulfil all the possibilities contained within this small, oil-rich nation. For pro-independence voters, hopeful possibility is intimately related to freedom of choice and fair

democratic representation and can therefore only exist within an independent nation.

As in 2014, the various imaginations of possible futures that drive the pro-independence movement today are not a product of wild, ungrounded, detached-from-reality imagination. Rather, they are rooted in the socio-historical narratives of Scotland's past and present. Many pro-independence activists take inspiration from Scotland's Enlightenment era to imagine Scotland's post-independence possibilities – a new cradle for technological advancement, better funded universities, and a reclaiming of Enlightenment prestige associated with geological exploration. Similarly, the possibilities that pro-independence activists campaign on can hinge on present socio-political issues in continuous emergence and flux with present developments – re-joining the European Union has become as a dominant possibility following the 2016 Brexit vote, as has speculation on the redistribution of oil wealth. The possibilities that pro-independence activists campaign on emerge as both clear and unstable, concrete, yet in continuous flux with the developments of the present.

Imagining post-independence possibilities serves not only to inspire voters, but to move individuals into political action, as pro-independence activists attempt to push into and grasp the future for present concerns. 'Feedback from the future', with a healthy dose of optimism oriented from the Enlightenment past, drives (action towards) possibilities in the present. Potential actualisation comes in the pursuit of a second referendum and the creation of the building blocks for an independent Scotland. Mock constitutions are written, plans to re-join the EU are drawn up and community groups are created in the name of 'acting as if you already live in an independent Scotland'. Past, present and future co-exist in a symbiotic relationship, the imagination of future possibilities emergent from past and present conditions affecting the way pro-independence supporters carry out their political activism. In this context, possibility is the key driver of political action.

Greece: Possibilities in a field of chronic crisis

In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, Greek prime minister George Papandreou 'discovered' the extent of the national debt and budget deficit, abruptly ejecting people from timelines of futural momentum based on hope, boundless potentiality, and high expectations that had been prominent since the 1980s. In what seemed like a blink of an eye, narratives turned from wedding preparations, planning foreign holidays, and investing in futures of education and mobility, to talk of possible times of hunger ahead 'as in the 1940s', feelings of foreign occupation 'like the Ottomans/ Germans' and a focus on caring for the nuclear family (Knight, 2015). From that moment of rupture, the so-called Greek economic crisis slowly but surely became a permanent existential state, a chronic condition that lined everyday decision-making and orientations for over a decade.

In 2010 the first of three bailout plans was agreed, whereby the European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund (the so-called 'Troika') would provide loans eventually totalling €326 billion in return for stringent financial restructuring. To this day, countless tax hikes, consistent cuts to public spending, record levels of unemployment, the restructuring of haulage and tourism industries, opportunistic international investment in sectors such as energy and healthcare, the decimation of pension and personal insurance schemes (the list is seemingly endless) and the subsequent degradation of kinship support networks continue to have a dramatic effect on everyday life for the majority of citizens and how they engage possibilities for emergence and imagining the future.

Knight recently framed over a decade of field research on the social consequences of the Greek economic crisis as 'vertiginous life' – of vulnerability and precarity, of being balanced on the cliff-edge and not knowing whether to hold on to the familiar or plunge into future unknowns (Knight, 2021). Within this context, most stories are of loss, disillusionment, and psychosocial trauma.[6] People report an inescapable condition of constant (social and affective) sickness, of captivity in the present, and a belief that possibilities towards the future have been erased, the threshold to cross the horizon out of crisis is ever-receding.

At first, people turned to the past to understand their emerging circumstances. Crises encountered since the formation of the nation-state in the early 1800s spoke to future possibilities of pain, foreign tutelage, a return to peasantry and social conflict. A resurfacing historical consciousness also promised the possibility that crises could be overcome, as they had been before. Either way, futural possibilities were to be found in the past in structures of struggle and collective fortitude. Everyday existence was focused on mundane tasks of finding employment, feeding the immediate family and paying the bills: possibilities beyond this spatio-temporal frame were, generally, inconceivable.[7]

As sudden rupture turned to chronic condition, there became a sense of societal Stockholm Syndrome (Knight, 2020). People had come to 'know' the crisis, could navigate it, and had found possibilities within the conditions of its suffocating grasp. Futures outside of crisis were unimaginable, but also undesirable, since what lay beyond the crisis horizon might be worse. This bred a psychosocial condition of uncomfortable comfort based on an understanding of the circumstances of captivity to international creditors. The intimacy with crisis-as-context (Vigh, 2008) foreclosed possibilities beyond the here-and-now: Stepping over the futural threshold, making new history, the obligation to invent, was not part of the everyday milieu. A stasis set in. Human freedoms and the possibility of possibility in philosophical terms was deeply constrained by socio-historical circumstances and their psychological impact.

Windows for imagining possibilities for a world otherwise were, however, to be found in rare micro-utopias of optimism such as

business diversification and enhanced sensorial appreciation that provided escapism or 'break-time' from repetitive anguish (Battaglia, 2022). These micro-utopias did not aim to immediately shift the collective status quo but did provide 'glimpses of something else and other' within the teleoaffective structure of the socio-historical era (Bock, 2016, p. 44; Cooper, 2014). Activities such as cycling, gardening, reading novels, and attempts to find secondary employment in new economic sectors, usually focused on individuals, were temporary, and 'conservative' (rather than operating in domains of radical activism or revolution, projecting the possibilities of a new world and new system). Within the conditions of crisis that generated general resignation and apathy about lost possibilities towards the future, people found bubbles to protect what *is*, but without completely negating micro-possibilities of an otherwise. These were not grand in spatial or temporal scale and projections tended to focus on small individual goals. Nevertheless, they could be said to be creative and audacious in their own right.

The possibility of possibility located in freedom of choice and audacious becoming has been drastically limited in crisis Greece. Not only do the concrete conditions of economic austerity, historical circumstance and social restructuring foreclose possibilities for the future, but the psychological impact of a decade of stuckedness has led to orientations of resignation and apathy, as well as a fear for what might be over the horizon. People are generally not taking the step off the proverbial cliff-edge as advocated in philosophical musings on vertiginous becoming. The audaciousness to create new history by fearlessly pursuing possibilities is tempered by immediate real world concerns of providing for a family, securing employment and paying taxes and bills. At first, possible futures seemed tied to pasts of strife and striving, but once the explosive rupture turned to chronic condition, life inside the crisis whirlpool was all that could be imagined. In a vicious circle, socio-historical conditions of crisis restrain people from forging forward into the future and breaking the shackles of a world they have just about learned to navigate.

Of course, for many of the people anthropologists work with, there is no 'philosophical' choice, no tangible boundary to be crossed (Kierkegaard), branch to be cultivated (Serres), or vertiginous leap to be contemplated (Runia, 2010); brazen audacity for pursing possibilities is weighed against worldly responsibility. Crisis-as-context provides predictability, uncomfortable comfort and familiarity, while sapping momentum from continuous futural movement (Heidegger). Anxiety trumps Kierkegaardian curiosity, concrete limitations stifle the philosophical luxury to embrace creative destruction in Serresian unravelling. To be a pioneer and to adventure in the possible is restricted to the micro-utopias of everyday activity within the teleoaffective structure of the crisis timespace. Perhaps being-possible is to be cultivated in these small steps in immediate nows, but people tend to explore their own solar system, their proximate backyards, in the vast universe of interconnected galaxies of possible becoming.

Conclusion

Working in the field of biotechnology, anthropologists Taussig et al. (2013, p. s4) state possibility is the *imagination* of open choice within an entangled mesh of science, technology and global financial flows, and is percolated through political agendas, Western moralities and claims to human rights. The field of possibilities is worked through these concrete conditions. Of course, how influential we deem the teleoaffective steering towards pathways of possible becoming depends on the distance and scope of what we term 'the possible'. In Scotland, the scope of the possible is potentially world-changing on a collective level – new political futures of independence, utopian imaginations, and a rewriting of socio-historical contracts of the Enlightenment and Unification. The scale of projections of the possible is wide-reaching and societal, the tempo is rapid, the affects vibrant

and intoxicating. Crisis Greece provides a context for micro-versions of the possible, individual, close to the Self, and very much temporary bubbles to engage with the otherwise. The entangled mesh does have portals of freedom but in the most part, the field of possibilities has been drastically curtailed by a decade-long formalised assault on imaginative capacities.

Philosophical musings on the human obligation to create new history through pursuing possibilities as future-orientations is tempered by socio-historical circumstance. The audacious, creative, innovative person is emersed in real world concerns that make up their timespace – bundles of affects, relations and cultural and political domains that offer certain trajectories to becoming. Some are laced with high-velocity momentum, others more cautious, even suffocating. A new branch in Serresian terms is sprouting in Scotland where there is the burning desire to realise possible new histories, the cliff-edge is all about clean breaks and daring gusto. In Greece, the cliff-edge generally signals a plunge into eternal darkness, a threshold of fear rather than innovation. A psychosocial Stockholm Syndrome orients people to cling on to what they have become accustomed to instead of seeking-out societal newness. In both fields, possibility propels notions of Self and Society as the topological past-present-future feedback loop powers the polychromic entanglement of cancelled lifeworlds and new beginnings.

It must also be acknowledged that the idea that there is such a thing as a clean slate for innovation and novelty is also a neoliberal (or at least post-Enlightenment) preconception. These include Kantian versions of cosmopolitanism where all humans are born equal and precede culture and history; business posturing on the possibilities of vacant urban housing lots; settler colonialist rhetoric of empty land ripe with possibilities (see Ahmann, 2022; Dzenovska & Knight, 2020). Indeed, Kierkegaard and Serres' talk of possibility as innovation, novelty, and learning from crisis might be read by some as an endorsement of neoliberal pedagogy. It evokes concepts of resilience, self-help and coping, and

personal entrepreneurship in how the precarious cliff-edge of possibilities is to be navigated in creating pioneering futures. Perhaps, then, the possibility of possibility is a Western concept for an already indoctrinated audience.

This is where anthropology steps-in, with its ethnographic method driving theoretical (and pseudo-philosophical) analysis. From similar starting points where research participants discuss the future in relation to a bundle of social, political and historical relations, we find possibilities both embraced and curtailed across multifarious scales. The energy of the timespace of possible independence in Scotland signals an enthusiastic gung-ho pursuit of the uncertainty located elsewhere and elsewhen on the other side of the horizon. In Greece, possibility is making the most of a chronic condition and not allowing oneself to project beyond the here-and-now. One of the tasks of anthropology is to critically place freedom of choice, audacious adventure, novel innovation, and the innate possibilities of the human condition within their socio-historical parameters.

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Notes

1. With roots in the work of Karl Marx and Joseph Schumpeter, an anthropological engagement with creative destruction has recently been provided by Kojanic and Badue (2020) and Dzenovska and Knight (2020).
2. Bryant and Knight (2019) have turned to the work of Giorgio Agamben and Brian Massumi to discuss the difference between potentiality and possibility. Potentiality refers to a capacity or faculty. Unlike possibility, potentiality 'is not simply non-Being …

but rather the existence of non-Being, the presence of an absence' (Agamben, 1999, p. 179 in Bryant & Knight, 2019, pp.110–111). For Massumi, 'Possibility is a variation implicit in what a thing can be … Potential is the immanence of a thing to its still interdeterminate variation, under way … The distinction between potential and possibility is a distinction between conditions of emergence and re-conditionings of the emerged. Conditions of emergence are one with becoming' (Massumi, 2002, pp. 9–10). It is not within the scope of the current paper to take this distinction further.

3. Indeed, a paper written from the perspective of Kantian-inspired cosmopolitanism – a significant anthropological strand – would unfold quite differently according to the premise 'The right to every individual to live according to the best knowledge humanly available' (Rapport, 2012, p. 102). From this stance, every individual is equally human, irrespective of time, space, culture and community. Simply, the human is, or should be, 'free from culture, custom and community'.

4. Serres (1995 [1990]) acknowledges how nature and objects condition the possibility of social contracts.

5. For Heidegger, there does need to be purposefulness in possibilities to activate latent potential. This is to say, possibility is not passive (Sinclair, 2015).

6. It is worth pointing out that in the first few years of economic crisis the condition of structural austerity and foreign-enforced poverty led to high-profile protest movements through which people envisaged the world otherwise. Although mainly located in Athens and major urban centres, the possibility to change the global neoliberal system was enacted in resistance movements. However, after the rise and fall of the radical left and the controversial 2015 referendum on a new bailout, mainstream protest and resistance movements fizzled out over most of the country. The imagination of possible new orders was generally replaced by resignation and reluctant acceptance. Crisis as rupture had truly turned to chronic condition.

7. In a comparable context of repetition and return, Andreas Bandak discusses how some events are not left in the past, but tie together landscapes of imagination, fear and haunting, as well as of resilience and responsibility, for futural purposes. The recurrence of events at different scales has the 'potential to tie down whole communities' (Bandak, 2019, p. 190). Events thus play out in history, in memory, and as an ongoing and recurring

possibility: This was also the prevailing atmosphere of pasts-as-possible-futures in Greece in the early crisis years.

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