Im/Possibility:
On the Production, Distribution, and Articulation of the Possible and the Impossible

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> Yes, gentlemen, the Commune [...] wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour.—But this is Communism, "impossible" Communism! (Marx 1986: 335)

In Luke 18:27, Jesus tells his disciples, "What is impossible with Man, is possible with God," thus positing an onto-theological relation between the possible and the impossible that allows utopia to be thought but negatively. In the sphere of *Realpolitik*—characterized today by pervasive neoliberal governance and rhetoric—negativity as such is habitually disavowed. But while few have demarcated im/possibility as crudely as then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ("there is no alternative") and German Chancellor Angela Merkel ("unsere Politik ist alternativlos"), affirmative humanist and progressive neoliberal discourse such as Barack Obama's "Yes, we can!" or Merkel's by now infamous "Wir schaffen das!"—which squarely and involuntarily echos the Jacobin's and sans-culottes's "Ça ira!"—likewise partakes in the material-symbolic production, distribution, and articulation of the possible and the impossible. Not to mention Marine Le Pen's assertion: "Trump made the impossible possible" (quoted in Marr 2016). Understood in this way, the possible and the impossible are always-already intertwined and contingent upon material and symbolic "conditions of im/possibility" of knowledge and experience (Kant/Lacan/Foucault) and the dialectic of domination and emancipation (Hegel/Marx/Fanon). Capital, moreover, as an "abstract form of social domination" (Postone 2003) weighs down on the im/possible with the iron force of the law of value, and this goes right down to "all the crud of the world; all the material forms of all the stuff that bears the imprint of this society," as the Endnotes collective has recently put it (2019:115):

> The affordances of the world open up a vast horizon of possibilities for action, but shaped as these affordances are by the imprint of social forms which are themselves formed by capital, it would seem that ultimately it remains the latter that gives and forecloses that horizon. [...].The world gives shape to possibilities for action, insofar as it makes some things easy, some hard, and other impossible. (117, 135)

Their somewhat pessimistic conclusion is that these "affordances" by and large facilitate the reproduction of "the old filthy business" [*die ganze alte Scheiße*] (Marx and Engels 1978: 161)—capitalism, that is.

Criticizing the Im/Possible

"Ears have been as deaf to the science of spillover as to that of climate, if not more so. [...]. One might regard Covid-19 as the first boomerang from the sixth mass extinction to hit humanity in the forehead," Andreas Malm (2020: 82, 104) argues in his widely-discussed essay on the Corona crisis. And yet, as Malm urges us to understand, while the dominant media discourse concerning the pandemic has been to cast it as an exogenous shock to business as usual, thus disavowing the socio-ecological roots of the crisis, many capitalist states in their role as 'ideal collective capitalist' (*ideeller Gesamtkapitalist*) haven taken extraordinary measures by implementing lockdowns of varying intensity across the spheres of production and circulation that would have been impossible, even unthinkable, before the pandemic. Unwittingly, then, in addition to the biggest disinvestments from fossil fuels ever seen, this also gave the lie to "there is no alternative" and market-solutions to crisis, if only temporarily (see Malm 2020; for a less sanguine view, however, see Ajl 2020).

If neoliberalism, in both its 'progressive' and 'neofascist' incarnations, remains the dominant form of crisis management of today's global capitalism, this is also because the possible and impossible, in political-economic terms, are tied to capital's "moving contradiction" (Marx 1993: 706) and "*absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*" (Marx 1990: 798; original emphasis). As Slavoj Žižek (2015) succinctly put it:

> Impossible and possible are distributed in strange ways today. On the one hand, in the domain of personal freedoms and scientific technology we are told, again and again, how nothing is impossible [...], everything is possible. On the other hand, especially in the domain of socio-economic relations, our era perceives itself as the era of maturity, in which, with the collapse of communist states, humanity finally has abandoned the old millenarian dreams and accepted the constraints of "reality"—which means, of course, capitalist reality with all its impossibilities [...]. So, again, our first task is to be, always, aware that when we are told "this is possible, this is not possible" we are talking about ideology.

Today, the very idea of a radical social transformation appears as an impossible dream. When "internment camps and franchise coffee bars coexist" (Fisher 2009: 2), the spectrum of the possible paradoxically seems to extend endlessly, regardless of the fact that what it covers in Fisher's example constitutes by all means an ethical impossibility. And yet capitalism so pervasively "occupies the horizons of the thinkable" that the "struggle between *detournement* and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, seems to have been played out" (9; original emphasis). In Fisher's view then, change cannot come from emphasis of the ways in which this naturalized social order causes suffering: exposing or demystifying the rather grim conditions under which the coffee-franchise bar can co-exist with the internment camp, "emphasizing the way in which [the system that enables this grotesque constellation] leads to suffering" (16) is all too easily contained within a capitalist realism that effectively disavows the "unconditional Real of global capital" (Žižek 1999: 4) through its very symptoms ("I know very well, but …").

At the same time, the combination of global economic and ecological crisis (cf. Foster, Clark, and York 2010, Moore 2015, Malm 2016, Malm 2017, Saito 2017, Clover 2019, McDuff 2019, Tapia 2019, St. Clair 2019, Malm 2020, Xu et al. 2020) seems to make radical social transformation a factual, even existential, necessity—that is, if we acknowledge that "we cannot legislate and spend our way out of catastrophic global warming" (Bernes 2019). New materialist accounts of the alleged impossibility of disentangling nature and society tend to occlude the material underpinnings of "the progress of this storm" (Malm 2017). For instance, hybrid "actor-networks" (Latour 2005), "hyperobjects" (Morton 2013), or "vibrant matter" (Bennett 2009) are taken to work themselves out, in trajectories that recede from historical materialist analysis and transformative action alike. Such emphasis on the mesh of "natureculture" (Haraway 2003) coincides with the blurring of political and "bare life" (Agamben 1998) in the production of surplus populations and contemporary border and migration regimes (see Dawson 2019: 189-231). Yet contemporary liberalism does not shy away from brutal austerity, militarized policing and border regimes, mass deportation, mass incarceration, economic and preemptive war to protect the logic of state and capital, while implicitly and/or explicitly delineating a whole set of political-economic, social, and cultural impossibilities. What appears in these phenomena, however, is a possibility (even necessity) of an outside of capitalist realism, a glimpse at a true breaking point for the naturalized illusion of a reality that ostensibly is without alternatives. Žižek makes a similar point when he identifies the "commons of external nature" and the problem of the "excluded" (i.e. from capitalist exploitation) as two of the possible antagonisms "strong enough to prevent [global capitalism's] indefinite reproduction" (Žižek 2009: 53). Outside of these antagonisms, he pointedly argues, any attempt at the kind of moralizing criticism that Fisher invokes are condemned to remain safely within the

realms of capitalist realism—alternatives in kind, not in quality, liberal self-assurance of the possibility of a sustainable high-tech capitalism with a human face.

Since the neoliberal state is "at once both the precondition, and result of, conditions of capital accumulation [...] the present crisis of capital expresses itself as a crisis of the state" (Surplus Club 2017) that is characterized by debt, austerity, and repression. Continued neoliberal austerity significantly lowers the capitalist state's share of the cost for the reproduction of labor. But this is a policy that inevitably results in increased immiseration, militarized policing, racialized carceral management, and riots: Clichy-Sous-Bois, Tottenham, Seattle, Ferguson, Baltimore, Oakland, Minneapolis, Portland, etc. (cf. Gilmore 2007, The Invisible Committee 2007, Wacquant 2009, Endnotes 2013, Clover 2016, Neel 2018, Robinson 2020). Given that some of capitalism's most successful managers today are authoritarian regimes (China, Dubai, Singapore), a mere defense of liberal democracy and civil society against the recent onslaught of political reaction—from Trump's American Bonapartism and creeping fascism under Orban or Bolsonaro to Modi's Hindu-Nationalism and Erdogan's quasi-fascist Islamist Nationalism—increasingly appears as a rather hopeless endeavor. The tradition of "authoritarian liberalism" (Bonefeld 2017) understands perfectly well that the state is a condition of possibility for the 'free market economy' that needs to be seized and held by force if necessary. Trumpism epitomizes the governance of an authoritarian neoliberal 'racket' at the behest of capitalist social relations, to protect the existing regime of accumulation at immense human and non-human costs. Since the 2008 financial crash and ensuing great recession the neoliberal doxa "there is no alternative," if still dominant, is in the process of breaking up and giving way to the New Right's authoritarian populism and creeping fascism. In other words: im/possibility has (been) shifted from TINA ("there is no alternative") to MAGA ("Make America Great Again"). "America," in particular, as it remains the world-system's increasingly contested hegemonic power, but also Britain, Germany, France, Turkey, Russia, India, or Brazil, for that matter.

Contesting the Im/Possible

Over and against hegemonic discourses and material-symbolic practices of producing, distributing, and articulating the im/possible stand various counter-hegemonic discourses and practices of the exploited and excluded that signal a break and claim the possibility, even necessity, to re-distribute and re-articulate the im/possible and transform their modes of production. Fredric Jameson is often credited with coining the well-worn quip "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism," while his critical addendum to the unattributed notion has received less attention: "We can now revise that and witness the attempt to *imagine* capitalism by

way of *imagining the end of the world*" (Jameson 2003: 76; emphases added). Radical history chronicles both the emancipatory struggles to contest and transform the im/possible (slave revolts, bourgeois revolutions, socialist revolutions, anti-colonial revolutions, women's suffrage, gay liberation, proletarian insurgency, etc.) and the non-partisan failures to imagine the end of domination as anything less than the end of the world—"an agenda for total disorder" as Fanon (2004: 2) insisted. "When one has no right to speak under the auspices of the universal, and speaks [and acts] none the less […], one speaks [and acts] in a way that may be readily dismissed as nonsensical or impossible" (Butler 2000: 39)—such "perverse reiteration" of im/possibility, grounded in the 'axiom of equality,' itself constitutes the terrain of concrete universality. In this sense, im/possibility can further be understood as the battle between the suturing logic of Law and the emancipatory logic of Desire (cf. Badiou 2011) as well as the historical materialist's epistemological and *revolutionary* task "to blast open the continuum of history" (Benjamin 2007: 262).

In the wake of the 2007-08 crisis, a growing number of philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic have reconsidered and affirmed the "communist horizon" (Dean 2012) or "communist hypothesis" (Badiou)—chiefly understood as "the proposition that the subordination of labor to the dominant class is not inevitable" (Badiou 2008: 37). That is to say, the question of the im/possibility of communism has returned with full force, even to the academic Left. Frank Ruda, for instance, has asked us to draw a (philosophical) line in the sand:

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

Hence Marx's notion of "impossible communism" *practiced* by the Paris Commune in 1871—a historical model of communist praxis and "communal luxury" (Kristin Ross 2016) more recently championed from the perspective of revolutionary Marxists, communization theorists, and council communists, writing in the pages of *Endnotes* or *Kosmoprolet.*

That the Commune is a matter of "representational uncertainty" (Wagner-Pacifici 2017: 105) can be seen as a mark in its favor: between "urban revolt, socialist revolution, an anarchist rebellion, a municipal revolution, or a civil war" (106), its apparent impossibility opens a space for the retroactive production, distribution, and articulation of its own conditions—in 1871 and today. The Commune, as the im/possible

political form assumed by the power of the proletariat's (anticipated) practical self-abolition, negating and destroying the old state power, does not signify the constitution of a new political power according to a utopian vision: rather it is an instrument which, as Marx says, "serve[s] as a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes" (1986: 334). Thus, according to Marx, the task accomplished by the working class is not primarily political in nature: it is a task which, naturally, passes through a political moment and political means, but whose purpose is always social. Marx and Engels's earlier notion of "the *real* movement [wirkliche Bewegung] which abolishes [aufhebt] the present state of things" (1978: 162; original emphasis) likewise is an anti-utopian model of im/possible emancipation. Here we find a rather succinct formulation of the immanence of communism to the present social formation (cf. Postone 2003: 303). But, as Franck Fischbach is careful to caution (against Hardt and Negri's metapolitical conception of the "multitude"), "if certain tendencies of Marx's thought head in this direction, this does not necessarily mean that there already exist in the present capitalist society objective elements of communism whose immanent development can carry this society beyond itself" (Fischbach 2011: 17). In other words: struggle remains mandatory.

Im/Possible Forms of Struggle

This special issue of *Coils of the Serpent* thus examines various facets, modes, and agents of the material and symbolic production, distribution, and articulation of im/possibility. The articles included analyze and critique the dominant forms of im/possibility from the perspectives of critical theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy, history, sociology, political science, literature, and cultural studies, and debate the pressing questions of what material, discursive, psychosocial, and affective constraints on subjectivity and agency exist today that help reproduce or contest a neoliberal and increasingly authoritarian "consensus," or what Jacques Rancière has aptly called "the police" as a "distribution of the sensible(2010: 92)." For Rancière, emancipatory politics always takes the form of a radical rupture. However, if we are to avoid lapsing into idealism, on the one hand, and vulgar materialism, on the other, this needs to be related to the sphere of circulation (of bodies and commodities) and the logic and compulsions of state and capital on a global scale. Any understanding of class struggle which excludes social relations anchored in rightlessness, wagelessness, and extra-economic coercion necessarily obscures the forms of state violence that constitute capitalism's capacity to reproduce itself (cf. Singh and Clover 2018). A materialist analysis of that violence is also what prompted Stuart Hall and his comrades' well-known formulation: "Race is the modality in which class is lived" (Hall et al. 1978: 394).

The first group of texts in our issue engages with the possibility of an emancipatory rupture in the order of possibility. In his contribution, **Jesse Ramírez** offers a critique of philosophical concepts of Europe which, in their lofty messianism, obfuscate constitutive violence, border regimes, and exploitation. In the 2006 film *Children of Men*, Ramírez sees a reflection of that political unconscious, according to which "*further eventual transformation cannot occur*." Ramírez positions *Europe: The Finite Task* against such eventlessness. At the margins of an ideology that suspends dissensus, the article discovers the "weird possibility" of a new universality of struggle. Just out of frame we find political movements collectively enacted rather than a miraculous impossibility passively awaited. How to achievethis collective practice beyond the given? In **Frank Ruda's** reading of Kant's *Anthropology*, such potential springs from the deployment of fully transparent illusions and the collective practice they enable. Movies may be able to bear out this transformative potential of illusions, a possibility that hinges on understanding them to be not-real but, nevertheless, treating the impossible as possible. As a result, this media-specific *Impossible InSight* allows us to glimpse "the not-all of the world as it is." Films offer repetitions-with-a-surplus, a pretense that retroactively transforms what existed before—and an "orientation beyond what appears to be given." Such a deliberately impossible orientation towards an absolute 'already with us,' as Ruda paraphrases Hegel, however, can be hard to come by. **Rebekka Rohleder** shows how the sense of possibility regarding the *Future of Work*, for one, has been curtailed: she traces a decline of utopias imagining the conditions of unalienated work and the generation of intrinsic value. Her article shows that we cannot understand class struggle without pinpointing our position in the historical development of what counts as work and who counts as a worker. After all, as Rohleder's account of contemporary dystopian novels shows, even the range of possibilities in fictional future worlds is extrapolated from the 'work society' of the present. Refracted through dystopian fiction, the inevitability of waged work at least comes to the fore as a mode of social exclusion—a technology of power circumscribing social possibility.

Our second section broadly revolves around the performance of im/possibility. In his investigation of Black Hegelianism, **Bryan Banker** traces the adaptation of "speculative dialectical synthesis" in the African American intellectual tradition. After tracing how W.E.B. DuBois developed the possibility of the dialectic method for the ends of African American 'self-realization,' Banker shows how that same logic finds expression in the performances of Paul Robeson. By tracing the "philosophical performativity" of the actor, singer, and cultural figure as a *Black Hegelian*, Banker also argues for the methodological possibility of giving the aesthetic of Black liberation equal weight as a contribution to emancipatory thought—leading, in Robeson's case, beyond 'double' to 'multiple' consciousness. As a result, the public performance goes beyond "the impossible possibility that is language" (Mbembe 2017: 52). **Maria Sledmere** also places performativity front and center. Specifically, her contribution not only suggests

hypercritique (her coinage) as a style of thought, but also *performs* the way in which it allows her to "read, write and perform within and in spite of the anthropocene's ambient sense of the impossible." Her article, then, does not approach cultural material from outside, but rather performs its imagined collectivity in a number of intersecting voices. Her exhilaratingly polyphonous textual performance is itself the "space of the impossible." **Sami Khatib** draws our attention to the "exploitation of labour power performed in the process of capital accumulation," and thus to the uncanny material dynamic underlying the crises treated in the previous articles. Tracing the *Drive of Capital*, Khatib's account of surplus value uncovers temporal loops in the sequence of capital accumulation. By tracing this "onto-chronic conflict" (by means of which the drive of capital produces its own preconditions), Khatib arrives at a systematization of Marx's monstrous figurations. His article confronts us with surplus labor persisting in monstrous un-death and an uncanny class struggle, the (surplus) enjoyment of which is (re)animated by an inexhaustible death drive. What results is an im/possible economization that cannot die.

With **Jesse Cohn's** *Revising the Future*, our issue turns towards the possibility of contesting the current horizon of possibility. Is there, after all, an alternative to state-enforced neoliberalism? According to Cohn, *The Free*, a 1986/2011 anarchist novel, answers in the affirmative. The fictional evocation of radical change not only provides a storyworld in which anti-authoritarian contestation is (temporarily) possible on multiple fronts, but also reorganizes the very conditions of *realism*. If, in radical politics and art alike, transformative action hinges on redistributing the terms of likelihood, the novel's polyphony at least indicates a new, impossible world. In contrast to the revolutionary carnival of *The Free*, **Lara Goldschmidt** sees contemporary speculative fiction as a perpetuation of capitalist realism. While featuring tentative visions of non-capitalist social formations, Goldschmidt argues, *Capitalist Realism and the Post-Apocalyptic Community* go hand in hand. Contemporary fiction series remain firmly entrenched in a metaphorical version of an unchangeable status quo. Particularly, *The Society* imagined in the eponymous dystopian show is one in which—absent sovereign power—rampant self-regard and chaos are imminent. By exploring how popular culture's transformative veneer makes scenarios beyond capital unimaginable, the article shows how Thatcher's "There is no alternative" takes on new, pseudo-revolutionary forms today. In his foray into the political unconscious of another imagination of the dystopian moment, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, **Marlon Lieber** comments on several recent attempts to make sense of current socio-economic conjuncture and the im/possibility of revolution. In his reading, the zombie is not only a symptom of the unresolved crisis of industrial profitability and processes of class decomposition, but also of the tension between their irreducible need to consume and their inability to do so by using money to purchase commodities. Lieber, who seconds Khatib's claim that zombies should "become comrades," draws particular attention to

the impossibility of closure in zombie fiction. This world, *Zone One* like so many other cultural artifacts seems to say, is beyond redemption. Another world is necessary—but to conceive how to get there from here seems almost impossible.

The articles converge on their accounts of the outside of capitalist realism—as well as the material and imaginative impediments to think, narrate, let alone *go* beyond a naturalized state of capitalist barbarism. In his interview with Marlon Lieber and Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich, **Joshua Clover** reminds us that Marx "provides not a set of static categories but a method that we can apply to the world before us," which leads him to abandon some well-established socialist strategies of contesting the "expanded circuit of capital's reproduction." Clover directs our attention to struggles in the sphere of circulation as well as reproduction struggles, whose ultimate horizon would be the commune form. The riot, in particular, is conceptualized as a "circulation struggle" of increasing importance in the context of capitalist crisis due to "a shift of capital's center of gravity into circulation." From this premise, Clover discusses how—as "*people fight where they are*"—it becomes possible to contest the mechanisms that make "a livable life impossible." Reflecting the role of racialized surplus populations, indigenous resistance, and global struggles against fossil industries and capitalism's manifold and pandemic-fueled crisis, Clover asks us to be weary of various "affirmation traps" that undermine the very "possibility of communal life and emancipation" and to come to terms with "the final impossibility of resolving [capitalism's] contradictions through growth."

In the wake of the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, massive protests and riots have erupted in hundreds of cities in and outside of the United States, many of which literally went up in flames. A militant rebellion—unseen in its scope and intensity since 1968—took shape before the eyes of the world, and so did the capitalist state's authoritarian response. Riot police, far-right militias, and a total of 62,000 national guard soldiers were patrolling the streets of Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Portland, Chicago, and countless other cities: from the coronavirus lockdown to military curfew in history-making "66 Days" (Clover 2020). Starting from the premise that "a militant nationwide uprising did in fact occur," Idris Robinson insists that "the progressive wing of the counter-insurgency seeks the denial and disarticulation of this [im/possible] event" (Robinson 2020). For the Endnotes collective, who have put forward an interpretation of the George Floyd rebellion in a long-form essay published at the close of 2020, the present conjuncture can be described as "a kind of *metanoia* (a conversion or turn) of the populations against the whole array of apparatuses and mores that can no longer successfully mould our species into an animal with no other habitat than wage labour and capital" (3). The recent wave of uprisings, then, suggests yet another blow to capitalist realism. And yet, it is not at all clear how—and if—this amounts to new articulations of communist possibility. Drawing on the work of Asef Bayat, Endnotes claim that the new "non-movements"

reflect above all the growing delegitimization of politics in a context of ongoing stagnation and austerity. It is the combination of steadily rising non-movements involving unprecedented numbers of people, with a decline in democratic legitimacy, that allows us to describe the trend of our era as the production of revolutionaries without a revolution. […]. [I]n their confrontation with capitalist reproduction, as well as in their hunger for community, the non-movements express a potential conflict with the logic of capital as such. (8, 18)

That is, discontent with the status quo and the willingness to challenge it in the streets is rising to levels not seen in a long time on a global scale, but it is not all clear who should be the subject able to deal a decisive blow against the capitalist mode of production: "what every wave of mass mobilization comes up against is the limited ability to move beyond a negative unity […] to establish a positive and creative social or political force" (17). In a series of Tweets, Bue Rübner Hansen praises their piece, but also charges them with assuming an "abstract and elevated perspective" at the "global level" that is insufficiently attentive to the "specificity of situations" and avoids reckoning with strategic questions of class composition. "Rather than studying the possibilities of the conditions," he writes, Endnotes' "focus is on the conditions of possibility" (Hansen 2020). This reminder that a materialist analysis cannot ignore the "logic of practice" (Bourdieu) usefully suggests that partisans of emancipation in the present would do well to analyze the historical production, distribution, and articulation of the possible and the impossible on various levels. As the late Ellen Meiksins Wood puts it,

> If what we are dealing with is not *teleology* but *history*, then the relevant category in characterizing the socialist project is not inevitability, not inescapability, not 'entelechy', not *promise*, but precisely *possibility*. […]. It is […] *historical* possibility, that is, the existence of determinate social and material conditions which make something *possible* that was *im*possible before, conditions in which socialism can indeed be a political project and not simply an abstract ideal. (Wood 2016: 144; original emphases).

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