

Geographies of the impossible

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Abstract

In this commentary, I trace the potential of ‘the impossible’ as a spatio-temporal category for geographical research. I proceed from the assumption that the impossible takes on an ever more prominent role in the contemporary zeitgeist, especially in light of current crisis dynamics, such as pandemics, climate change, or the threat of nuclear warfare. When the impossible ‘takes place’, it receives a geography, or means the end of geography. Geographies of the impossible suspend taken-for-granted facts, pave the way for new actors, function according to their own logic, and create spaces for extraordinary encounters. Studying these geographies encourages scholars to engage with dystopian and apocalyptic but also utopian and revolutionary spatialities as well as follow the desire to make possible tomorrow what is impossible today.

Keywords

Apocalypse, climate crisis, future, the impossible, utopia

Introduction

On July 11, 2022, the New York City Emergency Management posted a video online that provided New Yorkers with steps to follow if a nuclear attack occurs.¹ While the content of the video was hardly surprising (one is told to go inside, follow the media, etc.), the fact that such a video was released 30 years after the end of the Cold War is still noteworthy. The ‘Nuclear Preparedness’ video is another example of how political authorities in countries like the US are currently preparing for the worst. Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the possibility of a nuclear war has become a reality in the West again. Something

that seemed to be impossible since the Cold War slowly but steadily became part of today’s (not so normal) normality again.

Future-making is a constant process of negotiating what is possible and what is impossible. If something is considered possible, there is a chance that it can happen, that it can ‘take place’, while if something is considered impossible, it is assumed not to take place in the future. When human geographers study the future, they often do so based on questions of governing possibilities, including practices of precaution, preemption, and preparedness (see Amin, 2013; Anderson, 2010; Jeffrey and Dyson, 2021; Leszczynski, 2016). In this commentary, I proceed from the premise that the current

Correction (June 2025): In the published version of the article, the second affiliation of the author was inadvertently omitted due to an error. The affiliation has now been added to the article as “HafenCity Universität Hamburg, Germany” and the online version of the article has been updated to reflect these changes.

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social and political terrain is characterised by the fact that more and more often, ‘the impossible happens’; i.e., that new situations, events, objects, actors, and places arise, which expand, change, or at least question the space of (im)possibilities and thus transcend the limits of governing by anticipation.

Climate change is a great producer of impossible geographies: considering the apocalyptic impact of processes such as sea-level rise on social spaces worldwide, including hundreds of millions of people losing their homes, the destruction of entire cities, and the enormous loss of cultural heritage, means transgressing the limits of (geographical) imagination (Ghosh, 2016). It means imagining a world in which most of today’s political, economic, and social realities, especially in the Global North, no longer work. However, ‘[w]hile dramatic sea level rise seems scary, and may be impossible to imagine, the process is underway and is unstoppable in this century’ (Englander, 2021: xix). Whereas climate change proceeds in slow, still often unnoticed ways, other events have led to a sudden rupture of the impossible in recent years. If we think of how the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 emptied the public space of entire cities worldwide (Pohl, 2022) and led not only to the worst year on record in the history of tourism, but also to the largest disinvestment from fossil fuels ever seen, one could say that the pandemic was also a temporary producer of formerly impossible geographies.

Stemming from this, I reflect on the impossible as a spatio-temporal category of geographical research. If it is true that the impossible plays an increasing role in the contemporary social and political sphere, then it is necessary for geography to embrace the impossible – engage with and interrogate it to make use of the impossible for future geographical research.

The manifold spaces of the impossible

The impossible is a heavily loaded category with a range of philosophical implications, and I cannot do justice to the weight of this concept here. However, one might differentiate between two

notions of impossibility: *absolute* and *relative* impossibilities. While the former is ontologically impossible, in the sense that there is no chance for this impossibility to become part of reality, the other is only impossible from a particular standpoint and thus depends on certain epistemological criteria. One could say that absolute impossibility refers to what Hegel (2010) calls ‘limit’ (*Grenze*), an utterly external other that is fundamentally inaccessible, while relative impossibility relates to a ‘barrier’ (*Schranke*), an impossibility defined based on the parameters of a particular situation.

Absolute impossibilities open the field for fictional and artistic approaches. They depict spaces that operate under entirely different conditions, thus demonstrating how these conditions would impact human life. Through this, absolute impossibilities allow for ways of sensing and seeing, as well as thinking and dreaming of fundamentally different geographies (Shaw and Sharp, 2013). Some approaches, however, insist on the blurriness between reality and fiction. Surrealism, for instance, allows us to forsake reality by releasing us into the uncanny realm characteristic of psychotic breakdown where the difference between reality and fiction no longer holds, and where things that are usually considered impossible suddenly become real (Wilson, 2023).

When it comes to relative impossibilities, there is another spatio-temporal and powerful dimension involved. If something is relatively impossible, it often means that it is impossible at a particular time and place, and for some but not for others. Here, we encounter a paradox captured by Slavoj Žižek (2013: 142–144), namely, the strange distribution of impossibilities in neoliberal societies today: in domains such as scientific technology, one is constantly told that ‘nothing is impossible’. Think of people such as Elon Musk and his propaganda to ‘dream big’ (e.g. living on Mars), or how Joe Biden remarked regarding the images of the James Webb Telescope released in July 2022 that they remind us that ‘there is nothing beyond our capacity’. In the domain of social and economic relations, on the other hand, even the most moderate changes, such as an increase of healthcare or salary, are treated as impossible.

Knowledge can play a significant role when it comes to how something is treated as impossible. If one does not know the scope of possibilities, one more quickly reaches the point of declaring things (im)possible. Regarding climate change, two extreme positions come to mind here: while, on the one hand, many still treat climate change as in-itself impossible, there is, on the other hand, the position of 'climate fatalism' (Malm, 2021) according to which it is no longer possible to do anything against climate change. But knowledge alone is not what makes things seem impossible. This is where the psychoanalytic notion of *disavowal* comes in. According to this notion, one might 'know very well' about something and still act as if one does not know. Disavowal is a powerful driver when it comes to how societies (do not) respond to long-term crisis dynamics such as climate change (Swyngedouw, 2022). Take sea level rise for example: Coastal cities around the world continue to grow, waterfronts are still constructed, beach mansions are still being sold, and all this despite the fact that many of these places could most likely be flooded, abandoned, or even destroyed in the next decades. Why? Because even though we know about the catastrophic impact of sea level rise, we act as if we do not know. While island countries like Kiribati gradually disappear and capital cities such as Jakarta are to be replaced, in most parts of the Global North, the belief that one could continue with business-as-usual still prevails.

When the impossible entered the realm of possibilities in the past, it often did this based on the logic of a 'this can't possibly be happening'. After its occurrence, the impossible cannot be wiped out completely, cannot be simply forgotten; it leaves its traces, its rem(a)inders. While some remain faithful to what happened, others are traumatised by it and try to prevent it from happening again in the future. The impossible triggers not only various social anxieties and conspiracy theories, but also produces exceptional spatial configurations linked to attempts to master its appearance: from the memorials that are built to remind us that something happens 'never again' to the various infrastructures designed to secure places from being hit by the impossible (again). While the spaces produced in reference to

the atrocities of settler colonialism, wars, genocides, environmental tipping points, and alien arrivals provide a rich field of research for human geographers, I'd like to finish this commentary by emphasizing that this only tells half of the story. Yes, the impossible transcends the limits of the geographical imagination, but this is not necessarily a bad thing.

A place for the new

Henri Lefebvre (1976: 36) once stated: 'to extend the possible, it is necessary to proclaim and desire the impossible. Action and strategy consist in making possible tomorrow what is impossible today'. One of the reasons why the impossible has triggered so much resistance in recent years is that it evokes an end devoid of a new beginning. When we think of the end of the world that accompanies the current zeitgeist, we might say that this end is so frightening (and alluring) because it means an end without tomorrow. The Armageddon does not seem to ultimately produce any new (human) geography (keeping in mind that the Greek *geographia* means 'Earth writing'). The realities of climate fiction, for example, show us not only increasingly 'horrific images of humans' future, with possible traumatic effects in audiences, but also the trauma of not having a future at all' (Kaplan, 2016: 69). 'No future!' seems to be the motto underlying most of today's apocalyptic anxieties. But while '[u]topian discourses have given way to dystopian imaginaries on a scale rarely seen in earlier aesthetic [and political] periods' (Kaplan, 2016: 8), there is another side of the impossible, namely, the impossible as opening the space for new beginnings.

Here we encounter the post-foundational notion of *the political* as the 'art of the impossible' (Badiou, 2018). The political here means a moment of rupture that traverses the realm of (relative) possibilities and reveals their inherently repressive nature. The political, in this sense, produces 'space as an intervention in the state of the situation that transforms and transgresses the symbolic orders of the existing condition' (Swyngedouw, 2018: 59). This space does not have to be large in its scale. Even minor acts can produce spaces of the impossible. A classic example for this is how Rosa Parks did something (relatively) impossible by

taking a seat on a whites-only bus in Alabama in 1955, and how this demonstrated the inegalitarian and racist configuration of a constitutional order that nonetheless proclaimed the principled equality of everyone (Swyngedouw, 2018: 46).

Yet what unites most moments of staging the political as art of the impossible is that they often take place in public space. Take, for example, how in 2020, due to the pushback against institutional racism and the Black Lives Matter movement, protesters tore down statues and monuments of colonial figures in public spaces of cities worldwide. Do we not find here, at least in parts, a spatial ‘exploration of the possible-impossible’, even signs of a geography of ‘concrete utopia’ (Lefebvre, 2003: 186)? Is Black Lives Matter itself, with its call for a different (American) society without racially motivated violence, police brutality, and structural racism, not a way of ‘demanding the impossible’, to quote a slogan from May 1968? Is Rojava, the autonomous commune in northeastern Syria, with its emancipatory, sustainable, and anti-fascist organisation, not also a space in which the impossible happens?

When the impossible happens, it is always potentially traumatising. The question is for whom? A revolution, for instance, provokes a disturbance in the functioning of the state apparatus and sets in motion various defensive measures (from censorship to police violence, arrests, and killings of the revolutionaries). As I write these lines in September 2022, people in Iran are on the streets to fight against a repressive regime and for their right to express themselves in public space after a young woman was fatally injured by the morality police for not wearing her hijab properly. They demand something (relatively) impossible with the courage to face all state defenses. At the same time, a new wave of right-wing nationalists in Europe and elsewhere has started to propagate their own ‘revolution’ in recent years. They also demand something impossible: a political geography based on strict borders and separate ethnicities, a world of containers, without climate change, Covid, refugees, and other global matters. What distinguishes these political struggles is the status of the impossible. While the one fight for a future that breaks away from old traditions, the

other fight for the resurrection of the ‘old world’ they consider lost.

Studying the geographies of the impossible, therefore, not only means engaging with the dystopian and apocalyptic spaces produced by the knowledge, disavowal, fear, and prevention of the impossible but at the same time encourages further research on the (demanded) impossibilities that produce spaces for expressing conflict and experiment with new forms of social living. Let us particularly acknowledge the demand for and desire of the impossible spaces marked by the new, and to follow the processes and practices that make possible tomorrow what is impossible today. Geographers who explore the impossible then operate at the thresholds between fiction and reality, revolution and catastrophe, progressive and reactionary, past and future. In each way, geographical thought and praxis should further explore the spatio-temporalities of the impossible as they suspend taken-for-granted facts, pave the way for new actors, function according to their own logics, and create extraordinary encounters.

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Note

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-5d7V4Sbqk>

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