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The Politics of Possibility
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Abstract

In this paper I address, in a preliminary way, a problem of political theory that, while not new, has been brought home with special urgency by recent events. The problem is the predicament created by the imperative of coming to terms with the subject of political possibility and the concomitant difficulty of doing so. The argument of this paper is circuitous. I first argue that grappling with the subject of political possibility requires that we examine the intimate relation of symbol and strategy in politics. I draw a crucial distinction between the ways that the ability to calculate probabilities and to entertain possibilities enters into social and political interaction. I than identify the mechanisms – attention and imagination – at work in the ways symbolic forms govern our ability to envision possibilities. I show how political possibility is implicated with power. And I sketch some of the constraints and vicissitudes that make the politics of possibility a precarious enterprise. I conclude by briefly connecting my preceding analysis to the theme of antipolitics.

I.

In this paper I address a problem of political theory that, while not new, has been brought home with special urgency by recent events. The problem is the predicament created by the imperative of coming to terms with the subject of political possibility and the concomitant difficulty of doing so (Dunn 1980, 267,260). In the face of this quandary I pursue a basic intuition: in order to properly conceptualize political possibility we must recognize and analyze the intimate relation of symbol and strategy in politics. In other words, in order to better understand the notion of political possibility we must properly grasp its cultural dimensions. An example will perhaps lend some, at least initial, plausibility to this intuition.

The example is drawn from an interview, conducted in October 1982, with Bogdan Borusewisz, a Solidarity activist and underground leader. Early in the interview he harshly criticized the stance adopted by some Solidarity leaders during the period leading up to December 1981 when the Polish regime imposed marshal law.

> "There came a point when democratically elected activists lost all contact with reality. And reality was more than Solidarity, more than radical leaflets, and Radio Free Europe; it was the USSR, the army, and the security service, which we already knew in the autumn of 1980 had drawn up a list of people to be interned (Lopinski, Moskit and Wilk, 1990, 8)."

In other words, Borusewisz was no wild utopian, intent on holding out fantastic alternatives. He was aware that political reality and possibility are, in crucial ways, distinguished by material considerations.

In the same interview, however, Borusewisz reflects on the reasons why, during the days immediately after the regime imposed martial law, he and others thought it imperative to sustain the strike at the Lenin shipyard.

> "After all we had to defend a symbol; it wasn't a question of the Gdansk shipyard or the Repair Yard or even Gdansk itself but of Poland as a whole. If we'd managed to draw out the strike in the shipyard it might have been possible to hold back the authorities on all fronts. On the other hand, I was certain that if the strike at the shipyard collapsed, the fact that a coal mine or steel works was on strike wouldn't have made any difference, because people think in terms of symbols and would hang on as long as the shipyard hung on. That is why I tried desperately to defend the shipyard (Lopinski, Moskit and Wilk 1990, 30–31)."

As this passage makes clear, Borusewisz and others recognized that, over a decade or so, Poles invested the Gdansk shipyard with special significance. They had transformed the shipyard into a symbol, one that enabled opponents of the regime to sustain an alternative vision of 'Poland as a whole.'[1] Consequently, it became a focal point in the strategic struggle between the opposition and the regime. Unlike strikes elsewhere, the one at the shipyard, according to Borusewisz, symbolized the possibility, however fleeting, that Poles might resist marshal law. Ultimately, Solidarity could not

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[1] I take Solidarity to be a paradigmatic antipolitical movement (Ost 1990). The shipyard is among the central symbols in the "tradition of resistance" that Polish workers first constructed and then extended to other portions of society (Laba 1991).

sustain the strike at the shipyard. And although other strikes continued, the collapse of the strike there rendered the possibility of widespread, overt resistance inconceivable.

This example is intended to suggest how intimately connected symbol and strategy are in social and political life, and how they are related in ways that directly effect our capacity to envision political possibilities. My aim in this paper is to explore, and hopefully clarify, these claims in a preliminary way.

The remainder of the paper consists of six sections. In sections two and three I draw and hopefully make clear a crucial distinction between the ways that the ability to calculate probabilities and to entertain possibilities enter into social and political interaction. And I argue that the latter capacity is governed by the force of prevailing symbolic forms. In section four I identify the mechanisms at work in the ways symbolic forms govern our ability to envision possibilities. In section five I address the ways that political possibility is implicated with power. In section six I sketch some of the constraints and vicissitudes that render the politics of possibility a difficult and precarious undertaking. In section seven I briefly connect my argument to the theme of antipolitics.

II.

"What is politically possible depends in part on what men believe" (Dunn 1980, 260).[2] This is no doubt so. But it also is too quick. I put to one side for the moment matters of material or physical constraint. In this section I argue that the scope of political possibility is, in the most basic, theoretically important sense constituted not by beliefs or expectations *per se*, but by the range of things (e.g., actors, events, outcomes) concerning which relevant agents can hold beliefs or establish expectations. Here again, perhaps an example will help.

In his *Antipolitics*, a book largely devoted to envisioning a possible post-Yalta political framework, George Konrad reflected on, among other things, the prevailing uncoordinated, largely individualistic strategy of opposition in Hungary. He explained that:

> "We Hungarians never created our own KOR or Solidarity, because we didn't really believe that communist power could be reconciled with democratic institutions born of society's aspirations of self-determination. We saw what our Polish friends were doing; we wanted them to succeed, but doubted that they could (Konrad 1984, 129–30)."

This is a straightforward estimation of probabilities. Oppositional elements in Hungary, according to Konrad, had no difficulty envisioning collective political strategies such as those adopted by KOR or Solidarity. They simply believed that such strategies held out a very low probability of success.

Consider, by contrast, the emergence of radically unanticipated actors onto the political stage. When I say that such actors are radically unanticipated I mean that *ex ante* their appearance as political actors was not just unforeseen but unforeseeable. Here we might include, for instance, the way that the British working classes intruded into politics under the aegis of Chartism in the late 1830's. Or, more recently, and perhaps of

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[2] Dunn himself is concerned with grounding the notion of political obligation in a general conception of what in different times and places is political possible. He does not systematically explore the notion of political possibility.

greater relevance to the topic of antipolitics, we might we might include the way mothers infiltrated Argentine politics in the late 1970's. In such instances the very incongruity of such actors engaging in politics – *as workers*, or *as mothers* – scrambles established political categories and, thereby redefines the realm of possibility.[3] In the latter case, for a period of time this incongruity prevented the Argentine Junta from recognizing the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo as political actors in any relevant sense. Within the political categories to which the junta, like the rest of Argentine society, subscribed, "mothers were not perceived as political subjects." The Mothers of the Plaza, as a result, were enshrouded by a "political invisibility" that afforded them a strategically crucial, if temporary, advantage over the junta.[4] This was a matter not of probability but of possibility or, for lack of a better word, worldview. During the early months of the Mother's weekly demonstrations in the Plaza de Mayo, the junta literally did not understand the political nature of the protests. Such activity transgressed the boundaries of their political world. It simply was not possible for *mothers* to engage in politics.[5] By the time the junta reconfigured their conception of political possibility so that they could recognize the Mothers as political actors, and take repressive measures, it was too late. The Mothers of the Plaza already had come to symbolize, both domestically and in the international arena, the possibility of open resistance to the Argentine regime.

A worldview amounts to a basic understanding of how the world operates, of the sorts of entities (actors, events, outcomes) it contains. Among the components of a worldview is a more or less systematic "folk psychology," a general conception of persons and a corresponding set of expectations about how they typically behave.[6] In the present paper I focus exclusively on this dimension of political possibility – the types of political subject that relevant actors can hold beliefs or develop expectations about.

III.

It is important to distinguish, then, between the different ways that the calculation of probabilities and the consideration of possibilities inform political action.[7] And it is important to see how the latter trades upon the

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[3] Dorothy Thompson (1984, 11–12) captures the incongruity of workers entering the political of early nineteenth century Britain in the following way. "In the 1830's the good self-respecting workman did not mix in politics. ... When HM Inspector of Prisons interviewed the men in prison for Chartist activities in 1840, he spoke approvingly of the decision some had made to 'give up politics.' It did not occur to him that former Chartists should become Whigs or Tories. Politics in any form was not the business of the working man."

[4] I draw the quoted phrases from Navarro (1989, 257).

[5] Hence the practice of the junta of referring to the Mothers as the "madwomen" of the Plaza.

[6] On this point see generally Geertz (1983, 55–70) and Bruner (1990, 13–14,35,42–3,47,52).

[7] "There is a fundamental difference between a situation in which a decision maker is uncertain about the state of X and a situation in which the decision maker has not given any thought to whether X matters or not, between a situation in which a prethought event judged of low probability occurs and a situation in which something occurs that has never been thought about, between judging an action unlikely to succeed and never thinking about an action. The latter situations in each pair are not adequately modeled in terms of low probabilities" (Nelson and Winter, 1982, 67).

intimate relation of symbol and strategy in politics. All of this will perhaps emerge more clearly if we examine attempts to depict the world solely in terms of the calculation of probabilities.

Consider, in this respect, the austere, counterfactual world that rational choice theorists construct. Samuel Popkin's *The Rational Peasant* supplies a particularly instructive example. Early on, Popkin proclaims that he will advance an exclusively rational choice analysis of Vietnamese peasant politics and that, in so doing, he will treat cultural considerations as "givens" (Popkin 1979, 82). He aims to explain peasant politics solely in terms of the peasants' self-interest and their estimates of the likelihood that those interests can be realized. Toward the end of the book, however, Popkin reflects briefly on the decisive role that he attributes to "political entrepreneurs" in facilitating collective action among peasants (Popkin 1979, 259–66). He suggests that the success or failure of these leaders depended crucially on their competence and credibility. But, somewhat surprisingly, Popkin insists that their credibility derived from "cultural bases." He attributes the variable success of religious and political entrepreneurs over time to their differential ability "to utilize cultural themes", to orchestrate "terms and symbols," that resonated with their potential constituents (Popkin, 1979, 260–61). In short, political entrepreneurs engender and sustain credibility through symbolic action. They seek to coordinate and mobilize relevant constituencies by more or less skillfully deploying symbolic forms that have force over them.

I will return to Popkin shortly. But now consider a second theoretical example, one much closer to the "core" of the rational choice research tradition. Here I have in mind the ways that, like Popkin, non-cooperative game theorists tacitly incorporate symbolic considerations into their purportedly purely strategic models. For present purposes I will consider only one of the ways they do so.[8]

Game theorists tacitly incorporate symbolic force into their standard procedure for transforming games of incomplete information into equivalent but technically more tractable games of complete but imperfect information. This procedure is complex.[9] Simply put, it reduces, for analytical purposes, all forms of uncertainty to mutual uncertainty about the payoff functions characteristic of players in the game. All players in the game then construct conditional probabilities over the "types" of other player that they might encounter based on an initial objective distribution that game theorists typically attribute to "nature."

Symbol and strategy intersect here because, as game theorists typically do not recognize, "types" are not natural categories.

> "The everyday world in which members of any community move, their taken for granted field of social action, is populated not by anybodies, faceless men without qualities, but by somebodies, concrete classes of determinant persons positively characterized and appropriately labeled. And the symbol systems which define these classes are not given in the nature of things – they are historically constructed, socially maintained and individually applied (Geertz 1973, 363–64)."

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[8] A more obvious example is the way that Schelling (1960) invokes the "symbolic contents of the game" in order to explain how problems of multiple equilibria are resolved in strategic settings. This remains the standard resolution to this endemic problem even among more highly technical game theorists (Kreps 1990, 101; Myerson 1992).

[9] For a survey see Myerson (1985, 231–42).

The range of possible "types" in any population is marked and interpreted symbolically. Thus, for example, recalling the revolutionary events of Paris in 1848, Tocqueville reports repeated encounters with "workers," whom he readily identifies by their "blouses, which, *as we all know*, are their fighting as well as their working clothes" (Tocqueville 1987, 142 stress added).[10] Here clothing operates as a symbolic marker, allowing Tocqueville to recognize the types of actors he encounters and, thereby, to navigate perilous, highly indeterminant political circumstances.

Return now to Popkin. On his account, the political entrepreneurs who sought to coordinate the collective action among the Vietnamese peasantry encountered the daunting prior problem of projecting comprehensible, credible "visions of the future" (Popkin 1988, 61–62; 1979, 261). This required that they recast a political world populated by "rational peasants" into one in which other "types" – specifically credible, committed entrepreneurs – were genuinely possible. And it required articulating this possibility in "terms and symbols" that had force for relevant constituencies. Popkin argues that Communist organizers did not enjoy success comparable to that of religious leaders until they learned to articulate their vision of the future in indigenous cultural idioms. Prior to that point "[p]easants *did not understand* why organizers were offering to help them and were reluctant to join with them for even small local projects" (Popkin 1988, 62 stress added; 1979, 261). Their world was symbolically constituted in such a way that it could not accommodate the entrepreneurs' "type" as a genuine possibility. It thereby foreclosed the very possibility of cooperative collective action.

IV.

Consider the following remark that Jürgen Habermas once made in the course of a discussion of utopia.

> "In specific historical moments, where we can recognize a real social movement, real historical struggles, we also become aware that people do not fight for abstractions – despite the three great and ineradicable goals of the French Revolution. People do not fight *for* abstractions, but *with* images. Banners, symbols, rhetorical speech, allegorical speech, utopia-inspired speech, in which concrete goals are conjured up before people's eyes, are indeed necessary constituents of movements which have any effect on history at all (Habermas, 1986, 145–6)."

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[10] For further references to the "blouses" of workers, see Tocqueville (1987, 117,130,145). Tocqueville also intimates that workers were adept at interpreting the attire of other classes. For instance, during the June days he and Corcelle, a fellow delegate to the National Assembly, undertook something of a reconnaissance mission through the streets of Paris. He relates one of Corcelle's adventures in the following terms. "He told me afterwards that, having first passed several half-constructed barricades without obstruction, he was halted at the last one; the workers building it, seeing *a fine gentleman in a black suit with clean white linen* quietly walking around the dirty streets by the Hotel de Ville and stopping in front of them with a placid air of curiosity, decided to make some use of this suspicious onlooker. They asked him in the name of fraternity to help them in their work. Corcelle ... in the circumstances ... rightly thought it best to yield without a fuss. So there he was levering up the pavement and putting the stones on top of one another as tidily as he could. His natural clumsiness and his wandering thoughts luckily came to his aid, and he was soon dismissed as a useless laborer" (Tocqueville 1987, 139 stress added).

I agree. In fact, I would suggest that this remark is relevant not just to remarkable episodes, but, to political action and interaction more generally.

Habermas, nonetheless leaves open at least two especially pressing sets of theoretical questions. First, if as Bogdan Borusewisz noted in my initial example, 'people think in terms of symbols,' how are we to understand this process. In other words, why do political actors, whether individual or collective, indeed fight "with" symbols? What sort of force do symbols have that make them effective resources in political struggle? And, second, how are we to understand the dynamics of such symbolic contests? How do we specify the character of symbolic action? I address the first set of question in this section and the second set in the next section.

Cultures consist of intersubjectively shared symbols which actors invest with meaning and deploy in ritual, tradition and other cultural performances. It is a sort of "symbolic strategy for encompassing situations," for imposing conceptual order on otherwise indeterminant processes of interaction (Geertz 1973, 250,230,89; Ortner 1984, 129).[11] On this view: "Symbols instigate social action" (Turner 1974, 55). However, they do so, as I now argue, only indirectly. To see why, it is necessary to understand how symbols work. This, in turn, requires that we distinguish for analytical purposes the "scope" of symbolic forms from their "force."

The scope of a symbol or cultural performance refers to "the range of social contexts within which" relevant actors regard it "as having more or less direct relevance." Its force refers to its "centrality or marginality" in the lives of relevant actors, to the "psychological grip" it exercises over them (Geertz, 1968, 111–113). The efficacy of a set of symbolic forms clearly depends on the scope that actors attribute to it. This accounts for the propensity of oppositional social and political movements, for example, to generate elaborate, encompassing "alternative cultures."[12] Yet force takes analytical priority over scope. Any claim regarding the scope of a particular symbol or practice presupposes that it has force. Absent such force it wouldn't be relevant to *any* social context.

The force of symbolic forms is at bottom cognitive or conceptual (Lukes 1977, 68f). Symbolic forms, orchestrated in cultural performances of various sorts, "structure the way people *think* about social life" (Moore and Myerhoff 1977, 4).[13] They serve as "extrinsic sources of information" (Geertz 1973, 92) not in the sense that they convey detailed messages, but in a broader sense of imparting a view of how the world actually is – how it operates and how individuals can be expected to act within it. Symbolic

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[11] On this view, culture consists of "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." And a symbol is "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception being the symbol's 'meaning'" (Geertz 1973, 89,91,10). On the career of this concept of culture see Ortner (1984) and Barth (1989).

[12] This was true, for example, of British Chartists in the 1830's and 1840's, of American populism in the 1890's, of the turn of the century German labor movement, and of Italian Communists in the 1970's.

[13] This obviously presumes something about the way we think. But it does not entail psychological reductionism. Rather, it presumes an "extrinsic theory" of mind in which diverse human mental functions – cognition, emotions, dispositions, etc. – all essentially depend upon the availability of sets of symbolic forms (Geertz 1973, 215,45–6,76f,360f). Thus, as psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986, 15) contends, "a cultural tool kit – a set of prosthetic devices, so to speak" is essential to the full flourishing of "human mental activity." See also Wittgenstin (1967, para. 605–7).

forms, then, do not directly instill beliefs or values. Rather, they establish the focal categories of social and political interaction and, thereby, establish parameters on belief formation. Symbolic forms help delineate – in at least two empirically intertwined but analytically distinguishable ways – the realm of social and political possibility for relevant actors.

In the first place, symbolic forms operate indicatively to focus the attention of actors, directing it toward certain ranges of alternatives and away from others.[14] They assert order, relation and predictability in the face of indeterminacy (Moore and Myerhoff, 1977, 18). They *foreclose* possibilities. This process is not naive. Symbolic force discriminates. By calling attention to certain options, thereby defining them as viable or feasible, it forecloses other options. It constitutes social and political interactions on particular, partial terms (Lukes 1977, 68–9; Elkins and Simeon 1979, 128; Kertzer 1988, 87).

If symbolic forms only operated indicatively they would have an unvaryingly constraining, conservative impact on social and political interaction. But symbols also operate subjunctively to *disclose* possibilities often not immediately discernable in mundane existence. They thus open options that might go otherwise unconsidered (Bruner 1986, 26,159; Turner 1987, 26–7,41–42,101). Orchestrated in cultural performances such as ritual, for example, symbolic forms give palpable existence to as yet unrealized possibility.[15] They nourish the imagination of social and political actors, helping to "render the world less fixed, less banal, more susceptible to recreation" (Bruner, 1986, 159). Thus, this process is not naive either. By imaginatively disclosing and exploring possibilities actors can, within limits, redefine their options.

Symbolic forms, then, exert force over social and political actors by commanding their attention and capturing their imagination. They govern the mental capacities with which actors delimit the possibilities embodied in their extant situation and envision those that lie beyond it. So understood, the force of symbolic forms grounds the intimate relation between symbol and strategy in politics.

V.

Symbolic forms govern prevailing conceptions of possibility. They are, in Charles Taylor (1985) terms, "constitutive" of practices and institutions. This, however, leaves us on an ambiguous theoretical terrain. On the one hand, possibility is not defined purely by structural causes.[16] The notion of *political* possibility, in particular, presumes that actors intentionally and deliberately endeavor to constitute the world in particular ways (Elster 1978, 48–49). On the other hand, constituting or reconstituting the social and political world, disclosing or foreclosing possibilities, does not involve selecting or rejecting discrete, pre-defined alternatives. It is not, strictly

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[14] Stinchcombe suggests that attention is "the key link between individuals and cultural systems." The force of symbolic forms on his view resides in part in their capacity to establish "attention structures" that provide common foci of choice and interaction (Stinchcombe 1968, 247,235–36). Thus, as Elkins and Simeon (1979, 142,127–28,131,139) put the point: "Culture is unlikely to be of much help in explaining why alternative A was chosen over alternative B – but it may be of great help in understanding why A and B were considered, while no thought was given to C, D, or E."

[15] "In ritual," for example, "the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world" (Geertz, 1973, 112).

[16] Even if it obviously is subject to physical and material constraints (Follesdal 1981).

speaking, a matter of choice (Follesdal 1981, 402). Rather, it is a matter of the ways political actors seek, for strategic purposes, to exploit the force that symbolic forms hold for relevant constituencies. How are we to understand the character of such symbolic action?

In the first place, symbolic action consists largely in the efforts to invest a symbolic form or cultural performance with particular, partial meaning. Relevant constituencies share symbols and the cultural performances in which they are orchestrated insofar as they mutually attribute significance to that set. However, the meanings that individuals or groups within the population attribute to the symbolic components of their culture need not be shared. Symbolic forms, not the imperfectly shared, occasionally idiosyncratic, frequently contested meanings attributed to them, constitute the crucial intersubjective, public dimension of culture.

Meanings can be shared, more or less imperfectly, within a population or they can verge on the idiosyncratic. Indeed political acumen is properly conceived less as the capacity to invent new symbols than as the ability to creatively recast meanings invested in existing symbolic forms (Walzer 1967, 196). Anyone attempting such semantic improvisation necessarily will challenge the established meanings attributed to a symbol. And they quite possibly will confront discordant improvisations crafted by others. Symbolic forms do not simply express meaning. They enable social and political actors to make, remake and, in the process, contest meanings (Cohen 1985, 15).[17]

Second, as should now be clear, symbolic action is conflictual. Tocqueville brings this point home with especial force in one well known episode that he recounts in his *Recollections*. There he recalls as follows the opening in early May 1848 of the new Constituent Assembly to which he was an elected delegate.

> "I should be able to call to mind the look of that Assembly at its opening, but I find that my recollection is very blurred. . . . I can remember only our shouting "Long Live the Republic!" fifteen times in the course of the session in competition with one another. . . . I think that cry was sincere on both sides, but it stood for different, even contradictory thoughts. Everybody wanted to preserve the Republic, but some wanted to use it for attack, and others to defend themselves (Tocqueville, 1987, p. 99)."

Tocqueville was not a disinterested observer of this scene. Despite his partisanship he grants that the political factions contesting the meaning of 'the Republic' were sincere.[18] Delegates of the contending parties were not duplicitous; they actually interpreted 'the Republic' and the possibilities embodied in the political world in different, conflicting ways.

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[17] This line of argument has a contentious implication. It suggests that we shift theoretical attention away from a Durkheimian inspired preoccupation with culture as a medium of *integration* and instead think of symbolic forms as devices for *aggregating* meanings (Cohen, 1985, 20,21). Cultural symbols do not express value consensus or shared belief (Laitin 1988). Indeed, symbolic forms do not so much represent or express pre-existing values and beliefs as constitute the context within which individuals formulate beliefs and values. They help structure belief (Cohen 1979, 98; Kertzer 1988, 68).

[18] On republican symbolism during this period in France see Agulhon (1981).

Contests of this sort are essentially strategic, part of what Geertz (1973, 316) calls "the struggle for the real."[19] Actors engaged in such strategic contests seek, with differential facility and success, to exploit symbolic force in order to define the context of their ongoing interactions. Their objective is to establish as authoritative a particular and partial conception of the world and the social and political possibilities it contains. In the struggle for the real actors strive to command the attention and capture the imagination of relevant others by directing the symbolic media with which they think.

Third, the struggle for the real is pervasive and inescapable. It takes place across a range of arenas. For example, delegates who Tocqueville describes mounted their struggle at center stage, publicly contesting the range of possibilities contained in 'the Republic'. By contrast, peasants engaging in everyday forms of resistance are effective precisely because they do not assail the public stage. They "typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority." At a more mundane, local level, however, they too are engaged in a contest of interpretations, "a struggle over the appropriation of symbols . . . over how the past and present should be understood and labeled" (Scott 1985, xvi, xvii, 27, 178).

The struggle for the real is inescapable, it is not a contingent aspect of symbolic action. Actors have both the occasion and an incentive to take part. Cultures afford ample opportunity for symbolic contests. Because they are, by definition, multivocal, symbolic forms obviously invite discordant interpretation. Moreover, "cultural systems" are not seamless.[20] The interstices that they inevitably contain provide openings for semantic improvisation. Symbolic forms also establish a powerful incentive to engage in the struggle for the real. They do not influence thought or action deterministically by directly instilling individual values, beliefs or preferences.[21] Symbolic force does however circumscribe the range of possibilities over which actors might establish values, preferences, or beliefs. Moreover, symbolic force discriminates. It can focus attention on certain options thereby diverting attention from others and circumscribing possibility. It also can slacken the constraints of attention by sustaining unrealized options in imagination. In this way it can hold out as viable or feasible options that otherwise would not enter into consideration. In these ways symbolic force sustains particular conceptions of political possibility at the expense of others.[22]

The struggle for the real occupies the nexus of symbol and strategy. What is at stake in this struggle are political possibilities and the symbolic forms that govern how actors entertain them. The struggle for the real, then,

[19] When speaking of symbolic action anthropologists regularly use metaphors of "management", "strategy", "bargaining" and "negotiation." For examples and discussion see Johnson (1991). Metaphors are not merely literary embellishments. They structure social and political inquiry. The metaphors that interpretive theorists deploy provide warrant for pursuing the unexamined strategic dimensions of "symbolic action."

[20] The extent of their internal coherence and interconnectedness is an empirical question (Geertz, 1973, 18,406–407; Turner 1974, 163). It is very important not to prejudge the extent of this internal coherence (Barth 1989).

[21] Implicitly I am taking sides in a recent theoretical debate concerning cultural explanation. Symbolic force operates in the first instance to establish the focal categories of political interaction (Laitin 1988; Myerson, 1992) rather than to define values or preferences (Wildavsky 1987;1988;1992).

[22] Walzer (1967, 195–96); Lukes (1977, 68); Elkins and Simeon (1979, 128); Kertzer (1988, 87).

is a struggle over power. In seeing how this is so, we can also identify some of the vicissitudes and constraints to which participants in this struggle are subject.

VI.

The struggle for the real is a struggle over possibility. It is a struggle for power. More precisely, it is a struggle for power over others, a contest to control the media, the symbols and cultural performances, in terms of which social and political actors conceive possibilities and fashion them into viable alternatives. The intimate relation of symbol and strategy in politics pivots around possibility, feasibility and power.

Recall that the notion of political possibility presupposes that agents intentionally and deliberately seek to constitute the world in particular ways. Intentional action is the product of "two successive filtering devices" (Elster, 1979, 113, 77). The first filter specifies the "feasible set" by circumscribing the range of abstractly possible alternatives. The feasible set, then, consists of those options genuinely available to actors. The second filter is the process through which actors choose from among the options in the feasible set.

Strategic actors regularly contest the context of their interactions – including the prevailing set of feasible options that it makes available (Schelling 1960). Moreover, what often is at stake in such contests are the symbolic media through which others envision possibilities and identify some subset of conceivable options as feasible.

> "After all, options are not just opened or closed. They are essentially *seen* to be open or closed, and crucially seen so under particular descriptions, descriptions that can themselves motivate or inhibit action. . . . What one cannot envisage is difficult to choose (Rorty, 1988, 337–38)."

In any situation the "feasible" as distinct from "merely conceivable" options are a function of what actors consider "obvious," what they "take for granted" and there is no general criterion for differentiating genuinely feasible from abstractly possible options (Schwartz 1986, 224–228). The way this distinction is drawn in particular settings is a question of power.

Power is a relational concept. When agents exercise power they necessarily exercise it over others. In particular, they aim to define the set of feasible options that others consider when determining how to act.[23] Thus, power differs from persuasion which aims to modify how others evaluate alternatives. It does not directly alter another's preferences or beliefs regarding available options. Similarly, power differs from force which aims to eliminate choice on the part of those subjected to it by physically narrowing their feasible set to a single option. Power need not involve physical constraint. It aims to influence the way others to choose a particular course of action by modifying the alternatives available to them.

Power can work by altering the incentive structure that actors face. It consists, in such instances, of negative or positive inducements, threats or offers. But power need not involve such inducements at all. Indeed, actors can exercise power in strategic situations simply by credibly leading others to expect that they will choose a particular course of action (Taylor 1982,

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[23] The discussion in this paragraph is indebted to the typology presented by Taylor (1982, 10–25).

12–13,145). Actors who can successfully coordinate the expectations of a relevant constituency often can generate the sort of collective action needed to sustain selective inducements in the first place (Hardin 1990, 363,366–69).

Coordination, however, is typically as much a matter of expectations as incentives. Strategic actors can mutually coordinate their expectations only by focusing attention on one among a range of alternatives. They must create a "focal point" by endowing that option with prominence and this, in any given instance, typically is a product of "imagination" (Schelling 1960, 58). Strategic actors create focal points through symbolic action. They invest seemingly extra-strategic particularities with significance, thereby transforming them into symbols whose force coordinates social and political interaction.[24] They exercise power over others by symbolically structuring their expectations. Power in this sense, operates "along the cognitive dimension" (Lukes 1977, 68; Turner 1974, 134).

Power may be malign. "It might be said that the main function of a system of domination is" to foreclose options, "to define what is realistic and what is not realistic and to drive certain goals and aspirations into the realm of the impossible, the realm of idle dreams, of wishful thinking" (Scott 1985, 326). Symbolically constituted attention structures can be highly inhibiting. They foreclose possibilities By defining alternatives to existing arrangements as infeasible such attention structures can prevent subordinate actors from recognizing, much less pursuing a range of possibilities. On the other hand, even oppositional groups need to circumscribe possibilities.[25] They rely on attention structures to coordinate their activities and potentially to divert more powerful groups. This is precisely the strategy that the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, for example, adopted when they both occupied the symbolic center of Argentine politics (the Plaza from which they took their name) and did so as mothers.

Disclosing possibilities is a similarly equivocal process. Contesting the bounds of political possibility crucially presumes that actors can imagine alternatives precluded by extant definitions of the political world. Subordinate actors are adept at this sort of symbolic action. In particular, they demonstrate a remarkable propensity to symbolically reverse (and thereby expose the conventional character of) prevailing social and political arrangements (Scott 1985, 331). But if such symbolic action is pervasive, it also underscores the observation that "in matters of social constitution the field of possibilities is much wider than the people within each society imagine" (Tocqueville 1987, 76).[26] Symbolic reversals often are little more

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[24] In strategic situations not just incentive structures but "the aesthetic properties, the historical properties, the legal and moral properties, the cultural properties, and all the other suggestive and connotative details, can serve to focus the expectations of certain participants on certain solutions" (Schelling 1960, 113).

[25] Circumstances in which "all is possible" are extraordinary. They are fleeting at best. The telling characterization of such circumstances as "moments of madness" (Zolberg 1972) specifies precisely the sorts of conceptual constraint that prevents participants from sustaining them.

[26] This sort of constrained imagination is not characteristic solely of symbolic reversals. "At this moment several countries in Eastern Europe . . . have or about to venture into the greatest experiment in history since the forced Stalinist industrialization of 1929. . . . the economic transformations envisaged in these countries ironically mirror the Communist project. . . . They are radical: They are intended to turn upside down all the existing social relations. And they offer a single panacea, which once waved will cure all ills. Replace 'nationalization of the means of production' by 'private property' and 'plan' by 'market' and

than that. They do not so much project an *alternative* set of arrangements as, by reversing existing relations of dependency, inequity or injustice, depict and promote their *opposite* (Hirschman 1982, 95; Rorty 1988 338).

Actors who imaginatively explore unrealized possibilities confront serious hazards even if they manage to transcend this sort of ubiquitous constraint. Most obviously they might intentionally disregard or otherwise neglect pragmatic or material constraints (Follesdal 1981). Thinking back to the example with which I opened the paper, the symbolic power that Solidarity could command was dramatically inadequate in the face of the overwhelming military force that the regime mustered. Thus, in the spring of 1982, one Polish worker lamented: "We've got all the symbols, and they've got all the guns and tanks."[27] Actors who neglect such material constraints divert energy and resources into "futile exercises," flights of fancy that at best are compensatory. They encourage fantasy or utopian thinking in the pejorative sense (Rorty 1988, 341).[28]

Political actors face additional risks even where they pursue "genuine" possibilities, alternatives that are viable in the sense of being broadly consonant with pragmatic or material constraints. They might simply fail to realize possible objectives. As with all intentional action, a gap always looms between attempt and accomplishment. Conversely, having realized alternative possibilities, relevant actors might encounter a significant gap between the reality achieved and the possibility held out. Either eventuality can breed disappointment and resignation (Hirschman 1982, 94; Rorty 1988, 338). Either eventuality, may, in that sense, reinforce the sense of inevitability that enshrouds the extant political world.

VII.

The argument of this paper has been circuitous. I have argued that grappling with the subject of political possibility requires that we examine the intimate relation of symbol and strategy in politics. I have drawn a crucial distinction between the ways that the ability to calculate probabilities and to entertain possibilities enters into social and political interaction. I have identified the mechanisms – attention and imagination – at work in the ways symbolic forms govern our ability to envision possibilities. I have shown how political possibility is implicated with power. And I have sketched some of the constraints and vicissitudes that make the politics of possibility a precarious enterprise. I now want briefly to connect my preceding argument to the theme of antipolitics. I will make three short assertions.

1. Antipolitics, whether conducted by formally organized collective entities like Solidarity or by looser groupings of individuals like the Mothers of the Plaza, is implicated in the politics of possibility. Parties to antipolitics deploy symbolic forms with greater or lesser facility and success and they do so for strategic purposes. They aim to redefine the political world by recasting the bounds of political possibility in particular and partial ways.

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you can leave the structure of the ideology intact. Perhaps revolutions are shaped by the very systems against which they are directed?" (Przeworski 1991, 7).

[27] Reported by Laba (1991, 148).

[28] This discussion minimally requires that we differentiate imagination from fantasy. Imagination is concerned with fashioning genuine, viable, if unrealized, alternatives. Fantasy inclines toward the "merely possible," toward options that, while conceivable, remain "incredible" and consequently unrealizable (Rorty 1988, 340–41; Wittgenstin 1967, para. 275).

2. Antipolitics, insofar as it is concerned with possibilities, is a strategy in the struggle for power. This may seem peculiar given the aversion of spokesmen like Konrad to power politics. He claims that the "medium of politics is power over people – power backed by weapons" (Konrad 1984, 16). And he asserts that "No thinking person should want to drive others from positions of political power in order to occupy them himself" (Konrad 1984, 119). Yet since antipolitics of the sort in which Solidarity or the Mothers of the Plaza engage entails participation in the "struggle for the real", this suspicion of power is simply misplaced.[29]

3. It is easy to find pessimists, those who view the struggle for the real and the efforts to redefine political possibility that it entails as inherently dangerous. But it is not easy to find alternatives. In politics symbol and strategy are related in inescapable ways. So, for example, the invention of traditions is a pervasive strategic move in politics.[30] But observers of politics in post-communist East Central Europe typically express suspicion of political actors who invoke tradition (Gyani 1993; Jaworski 1985). They rarely consider whether, in such highly indeterminant political circumstances, it might be possible to invent normatively appealing traditions. I have in mind here, for instance, a tradition of constitutionalism (Johnson 1994). We must, as the brochure for this conference suggests, be wary of antipolitical mobilizations that threaten to derail the emergence or stability of liberal democratic political arrangements. However, the most effective response to such mobilizations is to engage in the politics of possibility. And this means recognizing the need to effectively exercise the power that emerges at the intersection of symbol and strategy.

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[29] It may be more appropriate to say that Konrad really is opposed to *force* as a final guarantor of political arrangements. But we should not let his invocation of "spiritual authority" or "moral opposition" (Konrad 1984, 119,122) blind us to the fact that antipolitics is part of the "struggle for the real" and hence is a struggle for *power*. Both Solidarity and the Mothers of the Plaza invoked spiritual authority in the face of authoritarian rule. But they did so in hopes of expanding the range of political possibilities beyond those sanctioned by extant political arrangements.

[30] Compare Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Schelling (1960).

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