

CULTURAL HISTORY, THE POSSIBLE, AND THE PRINCIPLE OF PLENITUDE¹

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ABSTRACT

Cultural historical research has deliberately challenged “historical realism,” the view that history is comprised entirely of observable actions that actually occurred, and instead has emphasized the historical significance of thoughts, emotions, and representations; it has also focused on the invisible, the momentary, and the perishable. These latter elements introduce the notion of the possible in history. This article examines the ways in which cultural history has approached the notion of the possible, as well as the methodological and theoretical implications of this approach. Its chief claim is that the idea of possibility is fundamental for the concept of culture and ineliminable from its historical study.

The question of possibility is present in multiple ways in the study of history; it is important to distinguish among different levels of possibility. The possible may mean, for instance, what it is possible for historians to know about the past, or the possibilities open to historical agents themselves, or, indeed, the possibilities they perceived themselves as having even if these seem impossible from the point of view of the historian. The article starts with the first aspect and moves on toward the possibilities that existed in the past world either in fact or in the minds of those in the past.

The article argues that the study of past cultures always entails the mapping of past possibilities. The first strand of the essay builds on the metaphor of the black hole and intends to solve one of the central problems faced by cultural historians, namely, how to access the horizon of the people of the past, their experience of their own time, especially when the sources remain silent. The second, more speculative strand builds on the notion of plenitude and is designed to open up avenues for further discussion about the concept of culture in particular.

Keywords: cultural history, micro history, potentiality, principle of plenitude, Alain Corbin, Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg, the concept of culture

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1987, the author Connie Willis published a short story entitled “The Schwarzschild Radius,” which has since appeared in the collection *Impossible Things*. The main character is the mathematician and physicist Karl Schwarzschild (1873–1916), who, serving in the German army in the First World War, has ended up on the Eastern Front. The German contingent finds itself in a situation where it is unable to send messages to the outside world. Schwarzschild, known

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for theoretically calculating the existence of black holes, receives a letter from Albert Einstein but cannot send messages of his own. The chilly Eastern Front is like a black hole that swallows up everything but itself remains invisible. Willis's story belongs to a type of science-fiction literature that imagines a different past, a virtual history that departs from the facts provided by research, engages in speculation, and presents us with a *possible* past. The story suggests that Schwarzschild found inspiration for his theoretical work in the particular black hole created by history, in which he and his comrades in arms found themselves.² Physicists and cosmologists are familiar with the concept of the "Schwarzschild radius," to which the story's title refers. This radius is that distance from the core of a black hole to the edge inside, where energy can no longer escape from the hole's gravitational field.³ Everything returns to the vortex, the presence of which can be inferred only indirectly from the surrounding space.

Although Willis's intention was to speculate about the possible historical background of this theoretical insight, the story leads one to reflect more broadly on the nature of history—and of historical research in general. What are the conditions for knowing history? Does the past send us messages? Are there occasions, times, and places where the past has left messages behind that have not reached through time-space to the present day, but instead have remained inside the Schwarzschild radius of history, the historical horizon of events? In history, too, there are objects whose gravity prevents messages from being transmitted. Historians are accustomed to examining their objects retrospectively, seen from the present, as fragments that require a construction of the past in order to be understood, or through which information from the past can be extracted. But this situation can also be seen in reverse: it is possible to ask how the past intentionally addresses the future, or how it perhaps refrains from doing so, or how the present of the past silences itself, or what kind of factors in the past lead messages—both material and intangible—to shun permanence and fade away without leaving any traces on active memory.

There are many stories behind the black holes of history. Enthusiasts of older history well know how little material they have available when compared to those studying later periods. Temporal distance alone makes it difficult to describe the past in all its richness. It is also clear that many of the messages that have survived have been prepared to withstand time, to remind posterity of their existence. In addition to telling about their time, they also reveal what has been deemed worthy of preserving, as well as what later generations have valued as an appropriate interpretation of the past. Often what is momentary, the things here and now done without regard to the future, remains invisible. In the fifth century BCE, Herodotus wrote his *Histories* "so that neither the deeds of men may be forgotten by lapse of time, nor the works great and marvelous, which have been produced some by

2. Connie Willis, *Impossible Things* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 90-114. "The Schwarzschild Radius" originally appeared in the collection *The Universe* (1987), edited by Byron Preiss and published by Bantam Books.

3. See, for example, John Earman, *Bangs, Crunches, Whimpers, and Shrieks: Singularities and Acausality in Relativistic Spacetimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5-6; James E. Lidsey, *The Bigger Bang* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100.

Hellenes and some by Barbarians, may lose their renown.”⁴ But literature does not guarantee the permanence of memory. Our understanding of Greek tragedy—and largely our understanding of the Hellenic worldview—is based on only a fraction of the literature written at the time. Of Aeschylus’s eighty-two plays, only seven have survived to this day; out of Sophocles’ 123 tragedies, likewise only seven.⁵ This patchiness does not apply only to the distant past: although the history of the twentieth century is considered well documented, it is estimated, for example, that half of the movies produced in the United States have been lost.⁶ Not one of the fiction films made in Finland before 1917, during the time when Finland was a Russian Grand Duchy, has survived.⁷ Contemporaries did not see products of popular culture as worthy of preservation, as monuments to be bestowed to later generations, and so didn’t conserve them.

The question of history’s “patchiness” is not only heuristic: it is also ontological in the sense that existence always entails the question of absence. In her study, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, Silvia Montiglio has investigated the importance of silence in Greek culture, notwithstanding the value it placed on words and speech. The study of silence is the simultaneous study of presence and absence.⁸ Even if all of Aeschylus’s tragedies had been preserved, the world of the past, its being in all its fullness—in its silences as well as its loudness—would still require more than what we can observe in order to grasp it.

Historical research has often been understood as the study of past events, *res gestae*.⁹ Yet it is now recognized that the purpose of studying history is broader than *historia rerum gestarum*. And even if the past is seen as comprised entirely of actions, and history-writing as writing about past deeds, it can still be asked whether actions need to be thought of as actual or also as potential. In the latter understanding, the past is not only “what happened” but becomes instead a realm of the possible. The main idea of this article is to reflect on the potentiality of the past. Cultural historical research has deliberately challenged “historical realism,” the view that history is composed entirely of observable actions that actually occurred, and instead has emphasized the historical significance of thoughts, emotions, and representations.¹⁰ This article examines the ways in which cultural history has—often implicitly and without proper articulation—approached the

4. Herodotus, *Histories*, I: 1. Herodotus, *The Histories*, introduction and notes by Donald Lateiner, transl. G. C. Macaulay, revised throughout by Donald Lateiner (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004).

5. Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1994), 22.

6. Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 29. See also Hannu Salmi, *Elokuva ja historia* (Helsinki: Finnish Film Archive, 1993), 56-57.

7. Hannu Salmi, *Kadonnut perintö. Näytelmäelokuvan synty Suomessa 1907–1916* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society & Finnish Film Archive, 2002), 14.

8. Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3-6.

9. Donald R. Kelley, *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 53.

10. See, for example, Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004), 49-73, 103-112; Alessandro Arcangeli, *Che cos’è la storia culturale* (Roma: Carocci, 2007), 52-59; Pascal Ory, *La culture comme aventure: Treize exercices d’histoire culturelle* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2008), 13-22; Anna Green, *Cultural History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 64-81.

question of the possible in history, as well as the methodological and theoretical implications of this approach. Its main claim is that the idea of possibility is fundamental for the concept of culture and ineliminable from its historical study.

The question of possibility is present in multiple ways in the study of history; it is important to distinguish among different levels of possibility. The possible may mean, for instance, what it is possible for historians to know about the past—the question that the metaphor of the black hole points to—or it may refer to possibilities open to historical agents themselves, or to the possibilities they perceived themselves having even if these seem impossible from the point of view of the historian. The distinction between the two last-mentioned perspectives is significant because a person in the past might have seen a range of possibilities that, from the retrospective viewpoint of a historian, can include a great deal that—in light of later research—would have been impossible. And conversely, a later perspective can reveal past possibilities that contemporaries did not see or would not have believed possible.

The study of the possible could then mean, first, what the agent of the past him- or herself thought possible; second, what in fact was possible for the agent; and third, what the historian reasons to be possible and, in the end, is possible for him or her to know. My essay starts with the latter aspect and moves on toward the possibilities that existed in the past world. My point of departure is that the study of past cultures always entails the mapping of past possibilities. The first strand of the article builds on the metaphor of the black hole and intends to solve one of the central problems faced by cultural historians, namely, how to access the horizon of the people of the past, their experience of their own time, especially when the sources remain silent. The second, more speculative strand builds on the notion of plenitude and is designed to open up avenues for further discussion, about the concept of culture in particular.

I will focus initially on the researcher's possibilities for knowing in a situation where the material remains silent. Here the question of possibility does not relate to the study of any un-realized state of affairs in the past but to a situation where the object of study is not visible, and in that sense remains a possibility for the researcher. In practice the levels overlap, of course, since in thinking about the possibilities for one's own knowing the historian also has to investigate the range of possibilities present in the world of the past. The researcher begins from the assumption that an invisible but actualized phenomenon is among the discoverable possibilities.

II. POSSIBLE HISTORY

The analogy between historical and cosmic phenomena may be extended in the spirit of Connie Willis by reflecting on the methodological means by which an invisible phenomenon can be investigated. How to verify the existence of an object of which there is no direct evidence? Black-hole research began as a theoretical question: together with Albert Einstein, Karl Schwarzschild created the mathematical and physical basis for it. An object that swallowed up all surrounding material and energy could not be detected, but its existence could be

theoretically deduced. Since then, astronomers have made empirical observations of black holes, although not directly but by interpreting the phenomena surrounding black holes. The foundation for empirical research has been an understanding of the existence of the object: after this, the question of possibility concerns our possibility of knowing.

When the past is silent, the historian must also consider the ways in which information can be gleaned about the invisible. Where black-hole researchers need to study information about the surrounding cosmos, the historian must use extensive materials, compare data, and, ultimately with the aid of a comprehensive interpretation, make deductions about the object. Natalie Zemon Davis points out the importance of comparison in her book *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983), in which she traces the meanings of a sixteenth-century triangle drama. The emotional world of rural France is difficult to reach, even though much was written about the story of Martin Guerre. At the beginning of the book, Davis notes: “When I could not find my individual man or woman in Hendaye, in Artigat, in Sajas, or in Burgos, then I did my best through other sources from the period and place to discover the world they would have seen and the reactions they might have had. What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past.”¹¹

In a number of studies, French historian Alain Corbin has also focused on the invisible, the momentary, and the perishable. Corbin’s studies *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination (Le miasme et la jonquille: L’odorat et l’imaginaire social, XVIIIe–XIXe siècles, 1982)* and *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside (Les cloches de la terre: Paysage sonore et culture sensible dans les campagnes au XIXe siècle, 1994)* have provided the foundation for a history of the senses. How to examine scents, the diversity of which simply cannot have been preserved in contemporary sources?¹² How to reach the world of sounds of the nineteenth-century countryside, the echoes of which have long since faded away?¹³ The historian of the senses often faces the question of possibility due to a lack of traces about the actuality of the past in the sources, having instead to deduce some past phenomenon on the basis of other evidence. The point is not that the historian attempts to reach, for example, the mighty sound of medieval church bells or the stench from eighteenth-century Parisian gutters as such, but rather that the world of sensory phenomena has disappeared with the disappearance of this world, and further, in its everydayness has remained unarticulated by those who experienced it; hence its existence is not apparent from preserved source materials.¹⁴

11. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 4.

12. Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Leamington Spa, UK: Berg, 1986), 4-5. For more on Corbin’s studies, see Robert Jütte, *Geschichte der Sinne: Von der Antike bis zum Cyberspace* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2000), 225-229; Philippe Poirrier, *Les enjeux de l’histoire culturelle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 189-192.

13. See, for example, Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*, transl. Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 95-158.

14. Hannu Salmi, “Onko tuoksuilla ja äänillä menneisyys? Aistien historia tutkimuskohteena,” *Tiede ja edistys* 1 (2000), 52-75.

In his book *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France* (*Le Monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot: Sur les traces d'un inconnu 1798–1876*, 1998), Corbin expresses clearly the injustice of history. Our view of the past is based largely on research about a small elite. For this reason, Corbin makes it his aim “to repair the neglect of historians for all things that are irrevocably relegated to oblivion.”¹⁵ Corbin’s study about the life of an early nineteenth-century clog-maker highlights the hubris of historians. His aim is to examine what historians’ skills can reveal about a person who could not read or write, who “never spoke out on behalf of his fellow man” and who “was not involved in any important affair.”¹⁶ Corbin even calls his work a “virtual history.”¹⁷ The work describes what was possible rather than what ascertainably happened. This is not in itself unusual. Many social historians have tried to look into the margins and to describe the forgotten worlds of the past in all their richness. What is unusual is the fact that Corbin does not have a single source that would enable him to see the past through the eyes of Pinagot himself.

The beginning of Corbin’s work explicates his methodological solutions, albeit briefly, in contrast to Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre*, for example, which leaves the boundary between the historical and the virtual to be decided by the reader. Corbin’s research is a methodological exercise, with a consciously chosen research topic. Corbin writes: “It was necessary to choose at random one of a myriad of identical social atoms. There was no other way to honor with remembrance a unique individual from an undifferentiated mass. Anyone whose fate was unusual in any way, who left an unusual record of any kind, had to be eliminated. Anyone who had not been totally forgotten, even by his descendants, had to be ruled out.”¹⁸

Corbin describes having initially used documents that were born in such a way that their existence did not relate to the object itself. After this, he tried to define all the information that could be known with certainty. Next, the information had to be put into context by describing as “fully” as possible everything that constituted the daily life of the chosen subject. The goal was to provide the reader with enough information to perceive the possible and the probable. Once this framework was in place, the historian could “speculate about hypothetical emotions and fragments of dialogue” and “imagine the social hierarchy as seen from below.”¹⁹

Of particular interest is a section where Corbin reflects on Pinagot’s thoughts on history. He does not have a single source in which Pinagot talks about his conceptions of history, or indeed even a source that would refer specifically to Pinagot’s relation to the past. In the beginning of the chapter Corbin does not

15. Alain Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in Nineteenth-Century France*, transl. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), ix. On the work’s reception, see, for example, Eugen Weber, “The Life of an Unknown,” *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002), 950–951.

16. Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown*, vii.

17. *Ibid.*, ix.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.* On Corbin’s methodological choices, see also Poirrier, *Les enjeux de l’histoire culturelle*, 271–272.

even speak of *knowing*. He asks: how can we *imagine* the ways in which Pinagot perceived the past?²⁰ His basis is that historical thought had to be geographically determined. In addition, Corbin reflects on how deep Pinagot's thinking about the past was actually able to go. Since there is no source-based evidence about Pinagot's historical thinking specifically, and because oral knowledge was central to the illiterate clog-maker, Corbin analyzes his main character's family history. According to Corbin's estimate there were people in Pinagot's immediate circle who had heard eyewitness accounts of the events of the 1640s in their childhood.²¹

In his analysis of Pinagot's historical thinking, Corbin finds it necessary to start with the researcher's own data: what kind of historical events and phenomena was Pinagot likely to have heard about, judged by what the researcher had learned of his subject. Corbin describes these events in order of probability. At the same time—as the author notes when implicitly commenting on historicist thinking—it is necessary for the historian to assess his or her own conceptions of history and paradoxically to attempt to forget the later conceptions and categorizations of other historians in order to understand Pinagot's thinking. Yet, on the other hand, forgetting is impossible—and in fact undesirable—because it is exactly his or her own thinking and memory that the historian needs in order to perceive the otherness of Pinagot's conceptions of history.²² This reflection is necessary in order that what is shown to be probable by later research is not seen as covering all that had been thought possible. Even the improbable can be possible.

Another example of recent research is Natalie Zemon Davis's *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (2006). It describes the life of al-Hasan al-Wazzan,²³ or Leo Africanus, a traveler and diplomat in the Mediterranean world, born in Granada at the end of the fifteenth century. Compared to Louis-François Pinagot, Leo Africanus is famous: a number of studies as well as works of fiction have been published about him—of which Amin Maalouf's novel *Léon l'Africain* (1986) is perhaps the best known. Nevertheless, Leo Africanus remains an enigmatic figure in many ways. In the introduction, Davis describes her strategy: she begins the investigation with the people, places, and texts, and from these it is possible to perceive what Leo “would have been likely to see or hear or read or do.” Throughout the book Davis uses the conditional tense as well as the speculative “perhaps” and “maybe.” Indeed, she states that, on the basis of contemporary evidence, she has written a “plausible life story.”²⁴ In the case of Leo Africanus, the situation is more auspicious than it is with Pinagot because the subject was a person who wrote. Yet, ultimately, the question is in what manner the researcher is interested in Leo Africanus. Although there is written material, Leo's experience

20. Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown*, 127.

21. *Ibid.*, 129.

22. *Ibid.*, 128-129.

23. This is the name used by Natalie Zemon Davis in the book. Leo Africanus presented his Arabic name in many forms. In the earliest remaining signature he used the form al-Hasan b. Muhammad al-Fasi. For further details, see Pekka Masonen, “Leo Africanus: The Man with Many Names,” *Al-Andalus-Magreb. Revista de estudios árabes e islámicos* 7-9, no. 1 (2002), 115-143.

24. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 13.

of his world is a black hole in history, information about which can be had only indirectly or through speculation, with recourse to the imagination.

Davis's book received mixed reviews. Some critics felt that the book did not really say anything new about Leo Africanus. *The Guardian* critic James Buchan interpreted it not as a work of history but as a "romance laden with footnotes," a postmodern work in which the line between true history and fiction is blurred.²⁵ At the same time, in her review in *The History Workshop Journal*, Maxine Berg took a different view, seeing the work as an innovative experiment in which the historian succeeds, with her broad contextual understanding, to fill in the gaps about which the source material was silent. The study of a "history of silences" requires a broad source-base and a comprehensive research literature.²⁶ At times, when it was impossible to say anything definite about Leo Africanus's life, the historian could speculate on what that life was probably like. Undoubtedly, this premise has led to the twofold reception. It can be argued that *Trickster Travels* is not in fact so much a study about Leo Africanus as it is about the kinds of conditions under which the encounter between the Christian and the Islamic world was possible.

The contradictory views of Davis's book can be related to the broader question of the nature of historical research—and that of history as science. In his book *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity*, John R. Hinde has presented an interesting interpretation of the emergence of scientific history in the nineteenth century. According to Hinde, important was not only the view that historical investigation pursued "true knowledge" (*wahre Erkenntnis*) as opposed to "probable knowledge" (*wahrscheinliche Erkenntnis*), but also the idea that *wahre Erkenntnis* of the past was, on the whole, possible.²⁷ Since the days of Leopold von Ranke, the question of historical research as a science has been at the heart of academic historiography. The idea of possibility, and that of probable knowledge, challenges the basis on which scientific history-writing so conceived was born. Moreover, nineteenth-century historiography was strongly attached to historical realism, the attempt to describe life "as it really was." Yet we can ask why realism should only mean that which actually happened, the factual. Could it not also mean seeing the past as a world of possibilities? Then history would not be a closed entity but would remain open, potential, and a scientific account of it would have to include a place for the possible as well as the actual.

In her book *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others*, philosopher Edith Wyschogrod has described two historians, the realist and the anti-realist. When the realist presents a proposition relating to the past,

25. James Buchan, "Search for a Legend. James Buchan Struggles to Find the Facts amid the Speculation of Natalie Zemon Davis's Biography of Leo Africanus, *Trickster Travels*," *The Guardian* (January 13, 2007). Buchan writes: "In other words, this is not history but a sort of romance laden with footnotes, a novel dragging an academic ball and chain."

26. Maxine Berg, "Crossing Boundaries," *History Workshop Journal* 65, no. 1 (2008), 230-232. See also Edmund Burke III, "Review: Life of an Unknown," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 3 (2007), 372-374; Jonathan P. Berkey, "Featured Review: Life of an Unknown," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 2 (2007), 459-461.

27. John R. Hinde, *Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 146.

stating a fact, the anti-realist sees its counterfactual reverse side in the same sentence: “Historical narration is a constructive act whose grammatical structure, the indicative ‘it was,’ is, as it were, the limiting case of the counterfactual, ‘it could have been but was not,’ that circumscribes it.”²⁸ Stating a fact about the past inevitably refers to many abandoned possibilities. Appreciating this leads to another sense of possibility different from the possibility inherent in what it is for historians to know about the past—to possibility in the past itself. It is time to examine this idea further.

III. THE PRINCIPLE OF PLENITUDE

The problem of abandoned possibilities brings us to the second strand of the essay. The question of potentiality has preoccupied scholars and scientists since antiquity. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle argued that history describes that which has happened, poetry that which could happen: “the work of the poet is to speak not of things that have happened but of the sort of things that might happen and possibilities that come from what is likely or necessary.”²⁹ According to Aristotle, “poetry speaks more of things that are universal,” whereas history examines “things that are particular.”³⁰ Poetry and history become intertwined in the sense that, although poetry deals with that which might happen, the possible, the possible also includes what has already happened. The “factual occurrence” of an event is a sign that it was not impossible. The poet also refers to history, especially in tragedies. Aristotle writes: “In the case of tragedy, though, they hold on to the names that have come down to us. The reason is that what is possible is credible; we do not yet trust that things that have not happened are possible, but it is obvious that things that have happened are possible, since they could not have happened if they were impossible.”³¹

Although two millennia have passed since the writing of the *Poetics*, it seems fair to ask whether today’s historians do not also attempt to connect the particular with the general in their work, and in the process the possible and the actual. It would seem that historians need to employ poetic means, too—perhaps in everything they do, but at least and especially in trying to describe what happened and in linking it with the general. That some critics saw Natalie Zemon Davis’s *Trickster Travels* as literary in its approach is perhaps justified in that literary means do provide the historian with a strategy for stepping away from the particular and for setting it into a broader framework. Construction of the historical context is the historian’s attempt to understand what made the object possible, and the answer to this possibility is not to be found only through examinations of individual events. In studying the time and culture of Leo Africanus, Davis

28. Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 167. On the problem of counterfactuality, see Martin Bunzl, “Counterfactual History: A User’s Guide,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 3 (2004), 845-858.

29. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a, 36-38. Aristotle, *Poetics*, transl. with introd. and notes by Joe Sachs (Newburyport, Mass.: Focus Publishing, 2006).

30. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b, 7-8.

31. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b, 14-19.

focuses on the possibilities within the range of which Leo acted. In the same way, Corbin—investigating Pinagot’s historical thought—studied precisely that general framework of possibility within which the clog-maker’s thinking became actual. Corbin does not deny that that thinking was in itself a realized phenomenon of the past, even though which features were actual and which were only possibilities ultimately remains a mystery, present in Pinagot’s contemporaneous world but unrealized in his particular case. Indeed, all historical happening is in a state of becoming: hence the question of possibility is present in all things, and the examination of the past must thus speak about the possible even as it tries to uncover the actual. What has actually happened is a subset of what can happen, and to understand what actually occurred historians need to understand what could also have happened but didn’t.

The historian can further speculate about the relationship between the possible and the imaginary. We can imagine things that are not possible. In the past world, impossible things could be imagined, and these impossible possibilities were, in themselves, real phenomena of the past: they comprised part of the thoughts and plans of historical agents as they decided what to do. They, in turn, influenced where contemporary thought drew the line between the possible and the impossible. From a retrospective point of view, this line could well be in a different place from a contemporary perspective: understanding of possibility is historically conditioned. The situation is not necessarily different in the natural sciences in the sense that “impossible possibilities” affect the imagination with which the consequences of natural laws are contemplated and understanding of possibility becomes more precise.

The issue of possibility was a central theme in classical and medieval metaphysics, simply because of the strong influence of Aristotle’s philosophy. Plato, too, considered the question in his dialogue *Timaeus*, according to which the demiurge created the world perfect and beautiful.³² Since the world was “perfected,” the demiurge had already created all imaginable possibilities.³³ This later fascinated Christian theologians: it was natural to think that God too had made the world complete in creation. In his book *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), Arthur O. Lovejoy crystallized the inheritance from classical metaphysics as “the principle of plenitude.” According to this principle, the universe is a *plenum formarum*: it contains the maximal richness of existence in such a way that all possible forms of existence also become realized. Nature is extravagant, but no single, real possibility of existence remains unrealized.³⁴ The classical approach included a belief in “the great chain of being,” the idea that all things in existence were connected. As the universe was seen as eternal, it was logical to think that all of the possibilities for existence had already been created in Genesis.

In the beginning of the early modern era, the idea of the temporality of the universe was confirmed. The question of whether the parts of “the great chain

32. Plato, *Timaeus* 28a-30d. Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

33. Plato, *Timaeus* 31a.

34. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), 52. See also Jaakko Hintikka, *Time and Necessity: Studies in Aristotle’s Theory of Modality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 95.

of being” existed simultaneously or whether they might form a temporal chain, a process in which creation continues, was raised. Above all, Lovejoy focuses on the thought of the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: at the turn of the eighteenth century, Leibniz held onto the idea of a static world but also saw the possibility of change. Leibniz asked the question: is nature always, at different times, perfect, or does its perfection increase with time?³⁵

Setting the principle of plenitude and historical writing side by side in this way may seem bold, but it is Leibniz who is the link between classical thought and modern science. In order to solve the quandary between the principle of plenitude and change over time, Leibniz invented his theory of monads. For Leibniz, a monad was the basic unit of the universe, individual, self-sufficient, and coherent.³⁶ Each monad was an aspect of the world’s totality; a monad was not just a fragment of the universe in the way an atom is; instead, each monad *was* the universe when viewed from a particular perspective.³⁷ Monadology affected the German *Aufklärung*, which applied it also to the examination of cultures: German Enlightenment authors saw epochs and cultures as perspectives on history conceived as a single entity akin to the universe itself in Leibniz’s thought, as unique instantiations of History as it moved from the past to the future.³⁸

According to Peter Hanns Reill, thinking that stemmed from the theory of monadology had an advantage in that it saw historical epochs as coherent entities that could be explained: sense and reason could be found in the events of the past, and the past could be understood from the point of view of its own cultural context. Thus, when the German Johann Jakob Bodmer examined medieval culture, he began his investigation from the conceptual system of the period in question.³⁹ (Contrast this with Voltaire, whose perspective when he wrote about exotic cultures or past times was always clearly that of a Parisian cynic. The French Enlightenment believed in the universality of reason.)

Reill’s controversial but thought-provoking thesis is that the scientific historiography of the nineteenth century owed a great deal to Leibniz, and that the historicist maxim of understanding the past on its own terms was closely related to the historical thinking of the *Aufklärung*. The idea of epochs is related to monadology. The Leibnizian legacy is also reflected in Leopold von Ranke’s famous words from *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte* (1854): “But I say: every era is in direct relation to God, and its value does not reside in what it creates, but in its existence, its own being.”⁴⁰ For Ranke, every era was a unique entity

35. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 255-256.

36. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Monadologie*, transl. and ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986), 13.

37. *Ibid.*, 13-35. See also Leonard Krieger, “The Philosophical Bases of German Historicism: The Eighteenth Century,” in *Aufklärung und Geschichte: Studien zur deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hans Erich Bödeker, Georg G. Iggers, Jonathan B. Knudsen, and Peter H. Reill (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 249-252; Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932), 32.

38. Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 215.

39. *Ibid.*, 215.

40. Leopold von Ranke, *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Theodor Schieder and Helmut Berding (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1971), 59-60.

that deserved to be studied for its own sake rather than judged or condemned from a later perspective.⁴¹ At the same time, Ranke's interpretation embraced the principle of plenitude in the sense that every era in itself was perfect, and realized its full potential.

Ranke's conclusions about the principle of plenitude—the fullness of possibilities—tended toward the idea of the inevitability of progress. If all possibilities were actualized, the course taken by events was unavoidable, and hence it was unnecessary to spend time considering unrealized paths. No doubt this involves a Christian conception of time that does not permit seeing history as capricious, as a world of numerous branching paths, dead ends, and broken possibilities.

Whereas Ranke introduced the classical idea of plenitude to academic history-writing, the historiography of the twentieth century has construed the idea in a completely different way. Plenitude, or richness, does not mean that options are limited, but rather that the researcher must try to grasp the diversity of past possibilities. Ranke was interested in the details of what actually happened, believing as he did that what happened embodied what could have happened. Wyschogrod has summarized the quite different understanding and consequent goal of the modern historian: the historian's passion often focuses not on the past itself but on its people, and therefore on what was possible but not necessarily actual in these lives.⁴² The idea of plenitude becomes different when an individual in the past becomes the focal point. When the past is examined in terms of the possible, as is done by historians such as Corbin and Davis, it is important to pursue the genuine possibilities that people of the past had, and, also, in order to reach the richness of the past, to speculate about the possible situations in which they found themselves—even when the material does not directly refer to these. Researchers aim—to cite Stephen Greenblatt—to give their work “the touch of the real”⁴³ by tracing the situations, feelings, and reactions that were possible for contemporaries, even if their existence cannot be directly read from the sources.

But the differences between the older and the contemporary view of history's connection to the possible extends beyond this to a consideration of the possibilities inherent in the past itself. Thus the completely different question is what people of the period regarded as possible. What if the “touch of the real” that the researcher provides does not adequately consider what it was that contemporaries saw as real? This question is an important one especially when there is very little source material concerning the object of the research and the conclusions drawn are based on indirect reasoning. How do we justify what the relationship among the possible, the impossible, the necessary, and the probable was in the fundamentally alien world of the past?

In *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Davis articulates the difficulty of studying possibilities—and also the pursuit of “the touch of the real.” The birth of the work, as is well known, was closely linked to Jean-Claude Carrière and Daniel

41. Jörn Rüsen, “Rhetoric and Aesthetics of History: Leopold von Ranke,” *History and Theory* 29, no. 2 (1990), 191.

42. Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering*, 38.

43. Stephen Greenblatt, “The Touch of the Real,” in *The Fate of “Culture”: Geertz and Beyond*, ed. Sherry B. Ortner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 14.

Vigne's film *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (1982). Davis notes that the filming was, for her, like a historical laboratory, "generating not proofs, but historical possibilities."⁴⁴ The question of possibilities is closely connected with that of narrative means: the French filmmakers had the dramatic license to experiment with possibilities that were not justified by historical data. Although Davis notes the significance of her historical laboratory, she is of two minds about it: "The beautiful and compelling cinematographic recreation" did not, as she concludes, allow space for "the uncertainties, the 'perhapses,' the 'may-have-beens,' to which the historian has recourse when the evidence is inadequate or perplexing"⁴⁵—and, we might add, to which the historical agents themselves necessarily had recourse as they responded to their situations, made plans for their future, and imagined what they would like and what they would fear.

As in her later *Trickster Travels*, Davis uses the conditional tense a great deal when contemplating those possibilities that the performed narrative, the film, could not consider. However, the paradox here is that Davis's version of the story of Martin Guerre was criticized for its fictionality. In *The New Cultural History*, the anthropologist Aletta Biersack calls Davis's work an act of "self-conscious novelization."⁴⁶ Davis admits that the story is in many respects "her own," by which she is unlikely to simply mean that the stories constructed by historians are always their creations. She emphasizes her desire to imagine what alternatives existed in the past. The "novelization" mentioned by Biersack in turn underscores the fact that speculating on possibilities seldom entails consideration of the conditions for deducing possibilities. If Davis had done so, the work would have been manifold in size. But if Carrière and Vigne simplified their story, so too did Davis. It is important to consider, however, the ways and premises for articulating possibilities in research. This is so simply because research always contains knowledge and views that are not based on empirical evidence. Humanistic study always presents arguments and makes assumptions that are not backed up by clear evidence. Polish historian Jerzy Topolski has called this "non-source-based knowledge,"⁴⁷ which may include our conception of what it is to be human—how we see the emotions of people, for example. In reflecting on possibilities, at least in Davis's case, the reader must rely on the historian's experience and extensive knowledge of material, since interpretations can seldom be justified only on the basis of a single datum or even on that of broader materials.

No doubt the way in which *The Return of Martin Guerre* deals with possibilities and leaves room for speculation is born of striving for plenitude, the desire to show the richness and openness of the past, in such a way that the reader will perceive it as a complete, and thus credible, description. But richness is not only a goal: it is a necessity, if assessing what was possible in a given time and place in the past is to succeed at all. In order for speculation about the possibilities to be

44. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, viii.

45. *Ibid.*, viii.

46. Aletta Biersack, "Local Knowledge, Local History: Geertz and Beyond," in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 77.

47. Jerzy Topolski, *Methodology of History*, transl. Olgierd Wojtasiewicz (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1976), 423. See also Edward R. Tannenbaum, "Review: Methodology of History," *History and Theory* 18, no. 2 (1979), 245.

feasible, it is necessary to construct a multifarious and comprehensive picture of the past, including that which is possible as well as that which was actually done or felt or believed, and including not only what was in fact possible but also what the agents themselves thought possible—thoughts that themselves contributed to that which was possible and ultimately to that which was actual. This accords with Wyschogrod’s observation that if the historian is anti-realist, she believes her story to be related to “some past *possible* history of the world, a history in the making that at any possible point could have been or not have been.” For this to succeed, the historian has to write “in the manner of holding-in-front-of-herself not only that which was but that which could have been.”⁴⁸

Lovejoy used “plenitude” to refer to the idea in classical and medieval metaphysics that everything that was possible was also realized. When compared with “plenitude” in Natalie Zemon Davis’s and Alain Corbin’s studies, this idea at first appears foreign because modern historiography sees time as multifarious and full of possible alternatives: plenitude signifies a world of lost and wasted possibilities, in which the course taken by events is only one of many alternatives. Still, one can say that premodern thinking shines through when the culture of the period in question is seen as a coherent context that provides the possibilities within which the investigation’s main characters function. Does not the credibility, and the vulnerability, of Corbin’s reasoning have its basis in the fact that he thoroughly understands the period he studies, the epoch and its internal logic, and that consequently Pinagot’s historical thought “must” be consistent with it? In this interpretation no such possibility is open to Pinagot that does not already exist in the world around him. Because of the heuristic nature of the situation, such a possibility cannot be present for him, or at least we can never know it, because no sources are preserved. However, Corbin—much more so than Davis—expends time and space discussing the likelihood of various alternatives. The principle of plenitude could be attained if only the researcher were to chart the various possibilities, yet refrain from pronouncements as to their likelihood. Especially when, for one reason or another, the object of research is invisible, the investigation of some issue or phenomenon possible in the past comes to a halt if the full range of possibilities is not investigated. Futurologists often speak of alternative futures,⁴⁹ but the study of alternative pasts is also necessary.

IV. THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE AND THE SPHERE OF POSSIBILITIES

Finally, it is necessary to consider possible pasts and past possibilities in relation to the concept of culture—solely because speculating on possibilities has been an integral part of cultural historical research. When the goal is to write history from the viewpoint of an agent in the past, *a history in human form*, it becomes necessary to consider those branching paths with which people in the past were faced. At the same time, the interaction between people and their environment comes

48. Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering*, 167.

49. Heli Paalumäki, “‘Imagine a Good Day’: Bertrand de Jouvenel’s Idea of Futuribles and the Fictitious Histories of the Future,” *Nordisk idéhistorisk doktorandkonferens, Helsingfors 2001. Ennen ja nyt* 2 (2001). <http://www.ennenjanyt.net/2-01/>, accessed August 30, 2010.

to the fore. What did the surrounding community and nature mean for Corbin's clog-maker, for example? How did he give meaning to them and what avenues opened up for his actions, thoughts, and emotions? The question is a challenging one because the object of the research, Pinagot, is invisible. He is at the dark core of a black hole, no longer able to send us messages. In such a case, the investigator inevitably turns to the surrounding cosmos, in this case the culture and opportunities within which the object of his study operated.

In a situation in which the past is—with reference to Connie Willis—a black hole, information is by nature indirect. In history, however, there is always an interaction between text and context, object and environment, the individual and the community. That which is at the core of the black hole shapes its surroundings and is in turn shaped by them. The invisible influences what historians take as possible pasts and at the same time is situated within past possibilities. But possibility, and the object that is nested within it, become difficult to evaluate in a situation where the primary source material has disappeared into the black hole of history. When the object is invisible, the challenge for the historian is to construct the object of research. It was in fact Ranke who said that the historian's work is always a creative act: "History is a science in collecting, finding, penetrating; it is an art (*Kunst*) because it recreates and portrays that which it has found and recognized. . . . [H]istory requires the ability to recreate."⁵⁰

Historians form their research objects, but if there is no direct evidence, they need to rely on whatever information is provided by the surroundings. Of critical import in this situation is the fact that the object cannot itself broaden our view of what is possible. Following the Aristotelian idea that what is known to have happened is not only what is possible but also the basis for determining what else is possible, historians have to assess possibilities on the basis of what they already know to be actual. In a situation in which history is a black hole, the principle of plenitude is attained in such a way that we can imagine nothing about the core of the hole that would contradict the information provided by the surrounding cosmos. But then the question arises: does this not in fact rigidify the perception of culture into a limited sphere of possibilities, and does it not, at the same time, defend a deterministic interpretation, in which the surroundings, the culture, produces the object?

The concept of culture is in many ways resistant to definition, and it is used to characterize often quite contradictory phenomena. Culture is described as a constantly changing stream in which the same constellation never materializes twice; but, at the same time, the term is used in a very stable sense. In *Trickster Travels*, Davis applies the concept to a wide range of phenomena. She writes of Muslim culture, Arab culture, literary culture, political culture.⁵¹ Even though since the "cultural turn" it has become standard practice to see culture as a continuous process, culture simultaneously repels change and rigidifies into various entities. Ranke's monadistic conception of epochs is still visible in the way the term 'culture' is used: we talk of Renaissance culture, Islamic culture, and the culture of the eighteenth century, as if these were separate, independent entities

50. Quoted in Rüsen, "Rhetoric and Aesthetics of History," 193.

51. Davis, *Trickster Travels*, 17, 99, 124, 141, 205.

fixed in their own distinctive structure of rules, beliefs, and practices. Moreover, this way of thinking includes—in Leibnizian spirit—the idea of the perfection of “monads,” in the sense that it is not the researcher’s place to evaluate cultures but to see them as they are, as specific phases and phenomena of history. In this sense, every culture is “complete.”

The semiotic understanding of culture that was born in the 1960s has contributed to the rigidity of the concept of culture. The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz in 1973 provided an influential definition for the concept in his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Drawing on Max Weber, Geertz wrote that culture is a web that humans have woven around themselves.⁵² The problem with this definition is that it objectifies culture, making it into something external to humans. On the one hand, the metaphor of the web describes well the diversity of the strands of culture and the unexpected connections among them; on the other hand, the word arrests movement and makes us forget that this web is not outside or around people, and is not fixed in place. Similarly, cultural meaning is not a knot in or a thread of a web, but rather a relationship. For this reason, meanings cannot be detached from the people of the past or from their cultural artifacts, as if these things could exist apart from those who live in terms of them. Nor can meaning be identified as a fixed entity: cultural meaning is in part comprised of the ongoing exchanges in which its bearers are continually redefined.

Semiotic influence, and similar conclusions about culture, can be found in Carlo Ginzburg’s classic work, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (1976). The author calls culture an “invisible cage” that surrounds people. For Ginzburg, culture provides people with a “horizon of latent possibilities”—a flexible and invisible cage within which people can exercise their own “conditional liberty.”⁵³ Every person is surrounded by a number of hidden possibilities that can be achieved, that exist on the horizon in such a way that they can be attained. Similarly, some possibilities lie on the other side of the horizon and cannot be perceived from within a given time.

In Ginzburg’s view the invisible cage prevents crossing the border of possibility: on his account the impossible cannot take place. One is reminded of the study *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais* (*Le problème de l’incroyance au XVIe siècle: La religion de Rabelais*, 1942), in which the Annales pioneer Lucien Febvre sought to demonstrate that François Rabelais could not have been an atheist.⁵⁴ Undeniably, Febvre’s arguments are strong, yet his goal is extremely challenging: to prove the impossibility of the impossible. Febvre tries hard to prove that atheism was outside the bounds of the “invisible cage” surrounding Rabelais.

52. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

53. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, transl. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), xxi. See also Paola Zambelli, “From Menocchio to Piero Della Francesca: The Work of Carlo Ginzburg,” *The Historical Journal* 28, no. 4 (1985), 983-999; Matti Peltonen, “Ginzburgin suodatin ja sorron arkistot,” in Carlo Ginzburg, *Juusto ja madot: 1500-luvun myllärin maailmankuva*, transl. Aulikki Vuola (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2007), 9-20.

54. Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, transl. Beatrice Gottlieb [1942] (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985).

Reading Febvre's and Ginzburg's books, one is led to think that the question of human freedom is always, and inevitably, at the core of cultural history. The problem with both a Rankean conception of epochs and a Geertzian web of significance lies in their rigidity: culture is placed outside the agent, as a limiting, conditioning—and facilitating—structure that is fixed in time. Yet individuals always negotiate and create their own limits. Therefore, the concept of culture needs to be construed as more open to the interaction among individuals and between them and their surroundings in a way that is more dynamic and diachronic in character. Only in this way can change in history and culture become understandable. In this, the role of possibility is central to what culture is. Thus, the concept of possibility is central to the business of cultural research because it places the interaction between the individuals and their environment onto a temporal axis that is open and indeterminate.

People in the past lived in a stream of time, facing unknown, branching paths, some of which they knew about, others they did not, and still others they imagined were there when they were not. In order to reach these possibilities the cultural historian needs the principle of plenitude, not as a closed metaphysical explanation but as an open attitude, necessary in the study of people of the past and of their lifeworlds.

V. CONCLUSION

This essay began with a black hole of history, possible history, from which it is difficult to extract any new information. But just as astrophysicists can determine features about black holes on the basis of inferences based on evidence about that which surrounds them, so also historians can draw inferences about the past even when it no longer offers any direct evidence about its nature. So, accordingly, the notion of that which is epistemically possible necessarily plays a central role in cultural history. But possibility plays an ontological role in cultural history as well: for cultures themselves are comprised of possibilities, some known to those who act in terms of them, and some not. Cultures are what might be termed branches of possibility that their bearers choose and even define, and in the process open up new branches. An account of a past culture that fails to include the dynamism that such possibility provides in culture will end up treating culture as something fixed and given, as something separate from its bearers. They will miss what I have called the plenitude that culture provides. Thus, in both an epistemological and an ontological sense, possibility is a crucial and inescapable element in any research on cultural history.

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