

**Theorizing the Potentials and Possibilities of Social and Spatial Life** – *Barney Warf*  
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This paper is concerned with how time, space, and society have been powerfully retheorized under the impetus of post-structuralism. Social science has steadily jettisoned long-standing teleological conceptions of social structure and change that pervaded Marxist and Weberian accounts. In the denial of the significance of human agency and its creative capacities, teleological interpretations draw a sharp line between the potential and the real, the possible and the impossible, the contingent and the necessary, what was and what might have been, between what is observed empirically and what could occur theoretically. Inspired by structuration theory and philosophical realism, disciplines such as geography and sociology have increasingly come to emphasize the contingent nature of social reality, i.e., the manner in which it could be different. Path-dependent analyses, for example, substitute contingent historical and spatial contexts for universal explanatory laws. The turn toward contingency has thus been accompanied by an associated retheorization of the role of time and space in the constitution and unfolding of social life, viewing them as social constructions rather than pre-social givens. In particular, older Cartesian and Newtonian absolutist notions of space have given way to a decided emphasis on relative space and, simultaneously, the reassertion of space into social thought via the “spatial turn.”

More recently, poststructural theorizations have focused on the rejection of simplistic dichotomies such as individual/society, culture/economy, nature/society, objective/subjective, global/local, and time/space, all of which thwart their effective integration. In place of such dualities, contemporary modes emphasize networks, such as the space of flows, commodity chains, and actor-networks, all of which circumvent either/or binaries and emphasize time and space as social constructions rather than simply as containers of social action.

This paper asserts that the theorization of social and spatial life necessarily involves the rejection of an additional dichotomy, that between the real and the imaginary, the actual and the possible, the ontological and the epistemological. If what we define as the “real” is not simply equated with the observed, if we broaden the definition of “reality” to include not only

what is, but what might be, then the lines between the real and the possible become blurred in productive and imaginative ways. Poststructuralism elevates unmaterialized possibilities to the level of ontology, i.e., what is taken to be “real” is not simply what is observable or actual but forms one outcome secreted from a broader universe of possibilities. Thus reality includes phenomena that never happened in fact, but could have happened plausibly, as defined by theory. Thus, the distinction between what did happen and what could happen is not obvious or unproblematic. History and geography are the understanding not only of why things happen, but why they do not.