Chapter 3

‘Living on the Front of the World’

*The Education of Radical Democracy* (Routledge, 2015)

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**Book abstract**

The Education of Radical Democracy explores why radical democracy is so necessary, difficult, and possible and why it is important to understand it as an educative activity. The book draws on critical social theory and critical pedagogy to explain what enables and sustains work for radical democratization, and considers how we can begin such work in neoliberal societies today. Exploring examples of projects from the nineteenth century to the present day, the book sheds light on a wealth of critical tools, research studies, theoretical concepts and practical methods. It offers a critical reading of the ‘crisis of hope’ in neoliberal capitalist societies, focusing on the problem of the ‘contraction of possibilities’ for democratic agency, resistance to domination, and practices of freedom. It argues that radically democratic thinking, practice, and forms of social organization are vital for countering and overcoming systemic hegemonies and that these can be learned and cultivated.
CHAPTER 3

Living on the Front of the world

‘Changing the changeable world is the theory-practice of the realizably real Possible on the Front of the world, of the world process’ (Bloch 1985, p. 246).

This chapter introduces Ernst Bloch’s concept of ‘the Front’ and illustrates how it can inform work for social justice and radical democracy within conditions of neoliberal capitalism.1 Although it is mentioned in much academic writing about Bloch’s Principle of Hope, the concept of the Front is rarely theoretically unpacked or assessed for its usefulness in practice – despite the fact that it clarifies in philosophical terms a number of core assumptions about the nature of transformative social and political processes (including both learning and revolution). Indeed, it is particularly relevant for understanding both the location and the experiential nature of radical democracy, for the latter’s orientation to unsettling fixed parameters of possibility, ‘overhauling given facts’ and opening new spaces for participation in social life is one expression of a ‘driving in things in which our affairs can still be conducted, a Front in which our future, precisely this, can be decided’ (Bloch 1995, pp. 288, 1376).

The aim of this book, however, is not simply to recognize that there is this Front, but to explore the relationship of this concept to practices of critique and creativity, to understand more about what actually happens on ‘fronts’ of world process, and to consider how they may be either made visible or generated in everyday life. While radical democracy does not always take the form of ‘frontier politics,’ I argue that the perception, production, inhabitation, and pedagogy of the Front are among the most important elements of radical-democratic activity in extreme neoliberal contexts. This is partly because they orient us towards spaces and times and possibilities of crafting emergent possibilities, and partly
because the they counteract both the foreclosure of radical inquiry and action and the production of political ontologies of collective hopelessness, or worlds ‘without Front’ (Bloch 1995, p. 5 Graeber 2009). In this chapter, I therefore consider how the concept of the Front may be used to map co-ordinates of hope on otherwise ‘flat’ surfaces of possibility, and how it can be conceived as the site of laboratories for revolutionary, practical–critical activity and learning. I then foray into a discussion of ‘abolition politics’ to illustrate how these concepts illuminate the types of learning, thinking, and methods that have sustained some of the most radical projects for humanization and democratization in modern history, and conclude with some reflections on the relationship between frontier politics and contemporary struggles for radical democracy.

While Bloch clearly had a sense of the philosophical category of the Front and its significance for real-world practice, he does not offer a single (or indeed, any well-developed) definition of this in his work. He refers to it variously as being the place of becoming of ‘the world, of world process’ (1995, p. 246) and of the ‘occurrence of reality’ (p. 237); it is also a name for situations in which there is a dynamic movement of ‘that part of reality which is coming onto being on the horizon of the real’ (p. 68), and more specifically situations where ‘man [and woman] and process, or rather subject and object in dialectically materialist process’ come into relation with one another (p. 200). The last definition is really the crux, both for Bloch and for the radical democratic project in extreme neoliberal contexts today, for while it is on the one hand the definition of a metaphorical place, it also points towards a method of action. As he wrote, the human being ‘everywhere is still living in prehistory, indeed all and everything still stands before the creation of the world, of a right world. True genesis is not at the beginning but at
the end, and it starts to begin only when society and existence become radical, i.e. grasp their roots. But the root of the history is the working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts. Once he has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: homeland’ (p. 1376).

‘Homeland’ for Bloch was democratic communism. As a German Jewish Marxist philosopher writing towards the middle of the twentieth century, his critique centred on the ‘alienation, dehumanization, reification, [and] this Becoming Commodity of all people and things, which capitalism has to an increasing extent brought with it’ (p. 1358). In his view, Marxism was the only theory proper to this activity, and he argued that all struggles against the foreclosure of human striving were ultimately manifestations of this ‘red arrow’ as it was shot through history (p. 1358). Today, despite ongoing debates about Bloch’s political commitments and judgements (particularly his relationship to Soviet communism under Stalinism), it is not his communist vision that matters most – indeed, his ‘red arrows’ of hope belonged, even when he was writing, to a much broader family of political practices and imaginaries than he was able to imagine. It is rather his empirical and philosophical analysis of how human beings actively encounter the future – including their future selves – as ‘undecided material, which can…be decided through work and concretely mediated action,’ and his argument that we can learn to create and work in such encounters, that remains most relevant for contemporary politico-educational work (p. 199). This activity is located on the ‘Front’ of possibility, where hungers and desires are made conscious, embodied, and transformed through practical efforts to realize them here and now, in critical dialogue with both the obsolete and unfulfilled tendencies of the past and the not-yet-conscious and
emergent tendencies of the future. Whether the latter take shape as ‘little waking dreams’ or utopian ‘castles in the sky,’ the insertion of them as forces bearing upon present realities creates possibilities for people to engage with the world, each other, and themselves as unfinished projects.

To live without hope that the future can be different and that we can be part of making it so, therefore, is to inhabit what Bloch called a ‘world without Front,’ when possibilities are diminished or foreclosed through the silencing of experience and desire (the negation of recognition), despair (the negation of future), totality (the negation of critique, excess, or outside), domination (the denial of movement), or death (nothing). We want to believe that we can refuse the futures given us and determine our own; that we can tend to and heal the pains of the present; and that we can experience joy, comfort, and liberation in everyday life.

A world with a Front, on the other hand, is one in which things are in a state of play – open, hopeful, undetermined, multiple, free, and alive – and in which we have the space, time, knowledge and courage to think and act ‘towards changing the world and informing the desire to change it’ (Bloch 1995, p. 8). Whereas a world without Front is monotonous and flat, a world with Front is spatialized with different forms of possibility and resistance – some which are realized and evident; others residual, latent, or emergent – that can alter as we transform our knowledge of and relationship with them. Bloch even referred to possibility (that-which-is-not-yet) as being a ‘region’ of reality, arguing that ‘real possibility is the categorical In-Front-of-Itself of material movement considered as a process; it is the specific regional character of reality itself, on the Front of its occurrence’ (ibid., p. 237).

Even extreme neoliberal societies, therefore, are not worlds entirely ‘without Front,’ but rather ones in which the possibilities of living on the Front are unequally distributed and
increasingly foreclosed for many – in which regions of reality as possibility are privatized or enclosed. But as established systems of social support and care fail harder in neoliberal societies, and as it becomes harder to defend even the most basic principles of democracy, justice, and autonomy within the parameters of legitimate thought and political action, everyday practices of freedom become increasingly radical. As Isham Christie (2011) has argued, ‘as socio-economic conditions continue to deteriorate and dissatisfaction in representatives grows, the response we are seeing is not cynicism or apathy’ but ‘the beginning of an awakening toward radical social change’ which recognises that ‘a liberal response to appease unrestrained capitalism and people’s interest is impossible.’ This awakening, however, does not automatically translate into either knowledge of how specific practices, institutions, and systems are loosened until they reach what might later appear to have been a sudden collapse, or into a courage which sustains work towards this end while they still remain intact. People struggle to imagine living either without or outside of capitalism when they try to imagine this becoming a material reality from within the confines of their political universes as already constituted, or with the proviso that they cannot live in opposition to the status quo. What they really mean, therefore, is that they have decided it is impossible for them to do the work that they sense is necessary for realizing this goal because they do not know how to pursue it from where they stand while remaining in that place, or because the forces of resistance against it seem too powerful to resist, or because the danger of punishment and loss outweighs both possibilities of joy and ethical demands – and therefore have decided that all imaginable efforts to reclaim the present and steer the future in better directions are destined to be inadequate and unsuccessful. In this depoliticized mode of hoping, they are often correct. Yet this is not the only mode, and not an educated one.
One of the best-kept secrets of social theory, and a foundational premise of radical democracy, is that possibility is political – its expansion and generation an objective of politico-educative work, not simply (or often not even possibly) a condition for it. Relations of domination are most durable when people believe that they are not only permanent, inevitable, and natural but also desirable (i.e., that they are free within it or liberated through it), and while it remains possible for them to engage in other practices of freedom and resistance without challenging the fundaments. This is why ‘the question of what is possible and impossible is really at stake in every situation’ and not the thing that frames every situation, and why the most interesting fronts appear wherever the location of this boundary, and thus the general distribution of possibilities, is challenged (Rancière 2009). As the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu put it most succinctly,

‘the relation to the possible is a relation to power; and the sense of the probable future is constituted in a prolonged relationship with a world that is structured according to the categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us), of what is appropriated in advance by and for others and what one can reasonably expect for oneself” (1990, p. 64).

Without a concept of the Front, our habitual ways of going along without prodding at the common-sense limits of what is possible can lead to, as Bourdieu put it, ‘cutting one’s coat to fit the cloth’ – we make do, conform, adapt, cultivate resilience or resentment. This is a practice of freedom of sorts, as it demands that we ‘co-operate in the various ways of going forward’ which are predetermined by power (Tully 2002, p. 540). Where these ways are imperfect, incomplete, or inadequate for particular people and purposes, it may be possible to ‘raise a problem about the rule of the practice in the languages of communication and
legitimation or challenge a relation of governance on the ground’ in ways that do not challenge the foundational parameters of possibility. While this affords slightly more autonomy, it remains a kind of deferred determinism in so far as the organizing principles and boundaries of the possible remain unquestioned, and the possibility of their transformation depends on the openness, willingness, and ability of the system’s defenders to challenge and reform them. But there are also situations in which people decide that the underlying rules of the game and conditions of possibility deny practices of freedom as such, and thus that an entire ‘mode of acting together and its constitutive forms of relational subjectivity’ can be challenged and changed (Tully 2002, p. 542). When people inhabit this stance with their bodies and minds and time and energy and words they create new ‘fronts’ of possibility, and here begin ‘dreaming inside history’ (Shor and Freire 2003, p. 479).

**The front as a co-ordinate of hope**

The Front is not a place; at least, not a fixed physical location that we can locate with a map. It is rather a contingent co-ordinate for the nomadic, always-already-possible but not-yet-actual situation in which established parameters of possibility are unsettled, in which it becomes possible to work most critically and creatively with the ‘undecided material’ of the present, and in which ‘the Unbecome is located and seeks to articulate itself’ (Bloch 1985, pp. 148 and 199). We can conceive of macro-institutional fronts (in the sense of engaging a system on ‘all fronts’) as well as fronts of micro-power where systems of power secure themselves by policing norms, desires, and identities; fronts can emerge within our encounters with ourselves as well as with one another (Foucault 1971, p. 230). Sometimes they look like spectacular events, but we can also see their contours in moments of authentic dialogue, struggles for dignity and recognition, radical changes in personal and political life,
and the articulation of new common understandings. Such situations constitute the ‘Front of world process’ because possibilities for change are intensified and multiplied whenever people channel intellectual and political energy into questioning social foreclosures and creating new definitions of reality (what Bloch called the ‘living-theory practice of comprehended tendency’). This active, subjective element distinguishes the Front from related notions of limits or obstacles. The latter refer to things that block practices of freedom and foreclose possibility: powerful institutions and institutional power, physical domination, hegemonic discourses that stifle critique and imagination, material insufficiencies and inequalities, and so on. However, these are merely the contexts in which a Front might be created through possibility-enabling activities through which the material of the now is negotiated through social activity.

The ‘multifarious hope landscape’ constituted by such fronts is a terrain of freedom, possibility, and hope. Once we realize that there are new worlds potentially coming over the horizon everywhere – what Gibson–Graham call the ‘ontology of a politics of possibility’ – then our own horizon of possibility is more easily enlarged (2006, p. xxvii). The more we learn about the different ways people have turned limits into frontiers, and about the ways they have transformed certain limits of possibility to make room for alternatives, the more we can have faith in this approach. The more we understand how power works through language, ethics, habits, relationships, emotions, needs, and desires, the more we can orient our thinking away from abstract forces that we presume exist beyond ourselves and focus on the practice of possibility itself.

Thresholds, boundaries, edges, borders, borderlands, horizons, zones of proximal development, liminal spaces, and symbolic and material frontiers – all these concepts
sensitize us to the fundamental problem of possibility. They are also important within radical
democratic politics, which gravitates towards fronts of possibility by striving to disclose,
unsettle, dissolve, transgress, transform, relocate, and refuse contingent limitations; to
challenge static concepts, identities, and relationships; to refuse necessities imposed by
domination; encourage encounters with difference that deepen respect for common life; and
to visualize possibilities that do not yet quite exist. As a defining strategy of power in
neoliberal societies is the parameterization of possibility through the suppression or
foreclosure of these very activities, a better grasp on the ‘possibility-disclosing practices’
which generate them is imperative (Kompridis 2006).

The concept of the Front suggests that people do not occupy either a smooth plane of infinite
possibilities or a state of ‘structural enclosure,’ but rather in historically constituted and
socially unequal fields within which only some possibles can be concretely realized at
particular times and in which all are constantly in process. Judith Butler’s work on gender
and sexuality has been particularly useful for clarifying the productive capacity of power to
create conditions of social existence by naturalizing certain borders of identity, truth, and
possibility and marking them off from others. ‘If I have any agency,’ she writes, ‘it is opened
up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose’ (and a world that may in
fact attempt to delegitimize my very existence). However, ‘that my agency is riven with
paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its
possibility’ (Butler 2004, p. 3). In other words, we may be dependent upon the very norms
and conditions that we need to undo. While this paradox is a condition of possibility, it is not
necessarily a front of possibility. To make it thus, we have to decide: ‘do I establish myself in
the terms that would make my life valuable, or do I offer a critique of the reigning order of
values?’ (Butler 2012) The act of throwing oneself into this situation and seeking its ‘leading edges’ of possibility, not the sheer fact of the situation itself, is what constitutes it as a front.

Similarly, it is possible to define possibility as a ‘distribution of positions’ that filters ‘what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought of as being possible. A situation defines a set of possibilities, and the impossible is the limit’ (Rancière and Liang 2009). But this only becomes a front if we work on ‘crossing the border of the impossible’ both intellectually and materially. Some theorists concentrate on how such border-crossing is actually accomplished. John Holloway’s theory of revolution, for example, revolves around the constituent power of what people do in the ‘cracks on the edge of impossibility,’ within which, he argues, we can break from capitalist rationality through thinking, feeling, and acting autonomously. While these spaces themselves are not necessarily fronts of possibility, any act ‘to recover the subject negated by objectivity, to emancipate the power-to metamorphosed into power-over, is to struggle to open each moment as a moment of possibility’ (Holloway 2010, p. 235). The cracks that interest Holloway are not those that we can discover, but ones we create; here, ‘crack’ is a verb, and it has a dual character. On the one hand, he describes it as ‘a real and constant clash. We fling ourselves over and over again against the advancing walls, and we get hurt. We scream until the ice cracks, and then watch as it freezes over again. Our cracks exist, but they exist on the edge of impossibility’ (ibid., p. 71). On the other hand, because ‘we are the heat cracking the ice,’ because we are venturing beyond, this activity can also be a joyful experience of going beyond what is given as possible. As Freire remarked, ‘in order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform’ (2000, p. 49).
Towards the end of *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch paints a picture of a land in which people wish to build their own houses (i.e., to live in self-determining ways) but must do so in an ‘inhospitable world’ full of social and political resistances – some so strong that they overpower even the desire for dwelling (p. 1331). Rather than being a hopeless world, however, it is an image of a world with front; a situation that demands and compels us to become a ‘working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls existing facts – including the facts of one’s own subjectivity (p. 1376). This is not capitalist work, wage labour (which Bloch regarded as a passive activity), nor is it creative work in a purely aesthetic sense. It is a kind of political, educative, and artistic work which cultivates new subjects and objects by striving to realize utopian principles and visions within conditions of constraint which themselves contain dimensions which are open to change (ibid., pp. 257, 261).

**The Front as a laboratory for revolutionary, practical–critical activity**

If spaces of possibility in neoliberal societies are contracted by a ‘hopelessness-generating apparatus’ that can social criticism and freeze the imagination in a ‘climate of fear, jingoistic conformity and despair,’ as David Graeber (2009) contends, then it stands to reason that we can create alternative possibility-enabling environments. Indeed, all democratic traditions are premised on a faith that people have ‘the capacity…for intelligent judgement and action if the proper conditions are furnished’ (Dewey 1939, p. 243). But is not straightforward to create conditions of possibility for democratic life; even less so within and against non-democratic institutions and systems of power. The presence of social conditions does not guarantee desired ends and cannot, in either anticipation or retrospect, be determined to be the cause of any. Conditions of possibility are therefore slippery, morphing, grail-like things; not stable.
and objective but, like the effects we believe they produce, relational and undetermined in a process of becoming. There are conditions that we cannot know and others that will have been necessary even though we cannot even yet conceive them. Inevitably, one critical condition of possibility is us (Gibson–Graham 2006).

Consider the difficulty of determining the possibility-enabling potential of something many people take for granted: learning. Creating and discovering new things are generally thought of as pleasurable and sometimes even liberating experiences. This belief goes unexamined in many varieties of radical democratic politics, critical education, and cultural work, all of which in turn emphasize the importance of cognitive, political, and ontological uncertainty in transformative experience. Being decentred is a condition for learning. But it may also be that ‘since the new in this sense is not something we can master, something whose effects we can predict and control, it arouses fear and anxiety,’ and that the same thing which ‘makes it uncontrollable also makes it a highly suspicious and dubious source of normativity’ (Kompridis 2011, p. 257). Encountering something new can elicit ‘reasons for why we should mistrust the new or they can become the intellectual and affective conditions necessary for its emergence.’ While this fear may be ‘a sign that you are doing your transformational work well’ (in other words, that you have succeeded in unsettling power and occasioned it to react), the experience of throwing oneself into the world without guarantees of safe return, especially without practice, can deplete or invert the transformative potential of the experience (Shor in Shor and Freire 2003, p. 482). In other words, the conditions that make one thing possible will have been conditioned, and they in turn conditioned, ad infinitum, in ways that can be difficult to trace. Because ‘while our possibilities cannot be fixed, we can become transfixed by a certain set of already disclosed possibilities’ (Kompridis 2011, p. 259).
As there is no way to know in advance precisely how this ongoing conditioning of possibilities will work because it is always in process, we cannot presume that specific conditions of possibility which make sense today will endure into the future (Dewey 1938, pp. 47–49). The more we try to describe conditions of possibility empirically, the more they ‘cease to be of an order such that could be described objectively’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 21). In recent years, this indeterminacy of conditions for political strategies that can counteract capitalist power has evoked hypotheses that conditions of possibility for success are ‘alchemic’ and can only be explained by the presence of some sort of dark matter or ‘fairy dust.’ This term, which is used particularly by anarchist activists and theorists to account for the x-factor in revolutionary political mobilization, had its origins in creative practice. The Free Association explains:

‘There’s a famous bootleg tape of the 1960s band The Troggs having a hilariously sweary argument at a recording session. The sound engineer, who failed to press stop on the tape player, captured the band trying desperately to grasp what turns any particular song into a hit record. The conclusion they reached is now legendary: “You got to put a little bit of fucking fairy dust over the bastard.” […] When we seek to go beyond what seems possible, analysis can only take us so far.’ (Free Association 2011)

However, acknowledging a role for chance ‘doesn’t mean just trusting to luck.’ Even the Troggs knew that fairy dust needed to settle somewhere: ‘I know that it needs strings,’ said the guitarist; ‘that I do know.’ Using alchemy as a metaphor to describe what happens between possibility and its realization is one way of theorizing, ‘in a materialist way…about
things that normally evade analysis’ (ibid., 2011). It calls attention to how bringing ideas, people, and materials together in freely experimental ways can have unpredictable and often inexplicable results. It also recognizes both the ‘disaster character’ and the ‘hope character’ of possibility, privileging surprise over both bliss and fear. What it lacks is a theory of how possibility itself is – or indeed, that it can be – disclosed and generated in practice.

Understanding how possibility is generated requires a different conceptual apparatus from the ones we use to solve practical problems in everyday life; different conceptualizations of both ‘condition’ (in particular the condition of matter) and ‘possibility.’ For example, the assumption that what appears to exist in the world as fixed and intractable is in fact so (i.e., a prejudice that ‘there is no alternative’ to a status quo due to the nature of its status-quo-ness or to a human being due to her ‘nature’) is a fatalistic knowledge of possibility. It presumes, though often not in an articulated way, that human beings, social relationships, and material and materialized artefacts (including of space and time) are static and self-evident. Such logic underpins beliefs that in societies dominated by capitalist, technological, and authoritarian rationalities and institutions it is not possible to abolish or replace these systems of power, or to make space for radical subjectivities and alternative practices to emerge from within them. Freedom of thought and movement and the emergence of possibility, however, are only possible if people ‘perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform’ (Freire 2000, p. 49). The belief that such acts are impossible in principle, the negation of possibility, is thus the hopeless underside of what Bloch called ‘formal possibility’ – an unfounded theory that all things are possible in principle and, in consequence, that anything conceivable should always be possible.
An alternative to both ‘structural enclosure’ (total stasis or determinism) and ‘extreme non-contingency’ (absolute freedom) in social life is to regard matter and possibility as relational (Bloch 1995, p. 234). This locates the genesis of possibility not in ‘objective’ conditions or ‘subjective’ will, but in their mutual transformation through activities that bring them into encounter with one another: ‘processus cum figures, figurae in processu’ (the process is made by those who are made by the process), and it is a messy and experimental affair.

Transformations of the self and of the world are interdependent; as Bloch writes, ‘possibility here in fact means both internal, active capability and external, passive capability-of-being-done; therefore, capability-of-being-other falls into capability-of-doing-other and capability-of-becoming-other’ (ibid., p. 232). The process of realizing possibility means working to bring together ‘the unenclosed potency to turn things here [and] the objective factor [of] the unenclosed potentiality of the turnability, changeability of the world within the framework of its laws, its laws which are however also legally variable under new conditions’ (ibid., p. 247). These are interwoven, as one cannot exist without the other: ‘[W]ithout the potentiality of the capability-of-becoming-other, neither the capability-of-doing-other of potency would have space, nor, without the capability-of-doing-other of potency, would the capability-of becoming-other of the world have a sense which could be mediated with human beings’ (ibid., p. 233).

This approach is underpinned by a prefigurative ontology, a theory of the social world which regards human beings, social and material conditions, and historical processes as ‘unclosed’ and ‘unfinished,’ and which privileges the knowledge, sensibilities, and social and political arts that generate or disclose the possibility of their transformation in seemingly foreclosed situations. ‘Real possibility,’ wrote Bloch,
‘does not reside in any ready-made ontology of the being of That-Which-Is up to now, but in the ontology, which must constantly be grounded anew, of the being of That-Which-Is-Not-Yet, which discovers future even in the past and in the whole of nature. [...] [It is] the categorical In-Front-of-Itsself of material movement considered as a process…’ (1995, p. 237).

For Bloch, this process included even the material dimensions of reality (being, therefore, not matter but ‘unenclosed process-matter’) (ibid., pp. 235, 236). He distinguished between different temporalities of matter: that which has been, that which is just now, and most importantly, that which is ‘not-yet’ – incubating, or emerging over a horizon of intelligibility. For Bloch, the not-yet was not a utopic category of the future but a material force of past, present, and future. This is grounded in a materialist argument in which ‘men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing,’ but also that ‘it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. [...] The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change [Selbstveränderung] can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice’ (Marx 1845, 3rd thesis on Feuerbach). This integration of self and social transformation distinguishes revolutionary (and, I suggest, radically democratic) action from humanist and reformist forms in the following way:

‘Humanism is based on the desire to change the ideological system without altering institutions; and reformers wish to change the institution without touching the ideological system. Revolutionary action, on the contrary, is defined as the simultaneous agitation of consciousness and institutions; this implies that we attack
the relationships of power through the notions and institutions that function as their instruments, armature, and armor’ (Foucault 1971).

The most potentially transformative kind of activity is that which can recognize ‘undecided’ and ‘precarious’ material in the present and work to shape its formation – including by creating such material through challenging that which appears as ‘decided’ or fixed. Indeed, he argued that courage to hope comes not from confidence of doing something risky with a chance of success, but from cultivating a courageous ‘attitude towards undecided material’ in the world (Bloch 1995, p. 199). This attitude is critical and appreciative; sensitive both to minute distortions of possibility and to the most ephemeral and tentative indications of its presence. While such work is not common, it is ubiquitous. Bloch sought examples of it in periods of revolutionary change (in bodies, conceptual horizons, or political regimes); it characterizes much of what progressive educators define as ‘learning.’ Later chapters in this book will examine examples of frontier politics in radical-democratic education and other forms of critical cultural work. To conclude this chapter, I will focus on an exemplary form of frontier politics which I believe demonstrates the power of prefigurative materialism in both spectacular and everyday ways: the militantly optimistic struggles to abolish slavery, lynching, segregation, incarceration, and all forms of racial dictatorship in the United States. Through this we also encounter a new concept, the ‘arc of justice,’ which opens conceptual space for thinking critically about the temporalities of radical-democratic practices and revolutionary social change.

**Abolition politics and the ‘arc towards justice’**

‘We aren't going to let any mace stop us. We are masters in our nonviolent movement in disarming police forces. They don't know what to do. I've seen them so often. I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there, we would move out of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church day after day. By
the hundreds we would move out, and Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth, and they did come. But we just went before the dogs singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around." Bull Connor next would say, "Turn the fire hoses on." And as I said to you the other night, Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the trans-physics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. And we went before the fire hoses.'

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968)

‘The impossible will take a little while.’

Billie Holiday (Loeb 2014)

The annals of people’s history – shared testimonies of how the world-making power of human beings is organized into struggles for humanization, dignity, and justice in the face of anti-democratic power, and how they free themselves from determination by cultivating various practices of freedom together – offer an education in the politics of possibility. As the U.S. historian Howard Zinn (2004) once pointed out, ‘we forget how often we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions, by extraordinary changes in people’s thoughts, by unexpected eruptions of rebellion against tyrannies, by the quick collapse of systems of power that seemed invincible.’ We forget about the incredible variety of non-hegemonic, ‘minor,’ and alternative forms of life with which we co-exist; forget, too, about the many defeats and disappointments which have been engaged as opportunities to participate more and differently; to begin again (Gibson–Graham 2006).

In this section, I aim to illustrate how prefigurative materialist modes of frontier may be practiced through the lens of abolition politics. While I do not suggest that abolition movements past and present are representative of this form, or that they can or should be generalized or co-opted to others, the tradition offers some particularly clarifying examples of what it means to re-read an ostensibly fixed state of domination as open to transformation, to
generate fronts of possibility, to work towards and on these fronts, and to cultivate an alternative sense of political time which allows political urgency and revolutionary patience to co-exist. An examination of the potential relationships between radical democracy and abolitionist forms of the politics of possibility is also timely as it has recently been a matter of interest in counter-capitalist activist communities, particularly those associated with Occupy and its satellite movements and amongst groups and networks campaigning for the abolition of work, money, the use of fossil fuel, and debt (as well as longer-running campaigns to abolish the prison, capital punishment and compulsory schooling). Some observers make a direct connection between the newest counter-capitalist movements and abolitionist traditions, including arguments that there is a ‘chain of resonance from the Haitian revolutionaries through the US Abolitionists and Reconstructionists down to today’s critiques of the prison-industrial complex and the global justice movements,’ and that ‘implicit in the Occupy movement was the renewal of what W. E. B. Du Bois called “abolition democracy”’ (Du Bois 1935a; Mirzoeff 2013).

This is also because, as I will explain below, abolition is a normative and strategic frame which allows people not only to call for the reform or transformation of existing circumstances, but to take a ‘radical stance…announcing [the] obsolescence’ of a particular state of affairs and organization of social life, and the necessary possibility of another. It is a politics that asserts the non-necessity, unfinishedness and political constitution of the world-as-it-is and the reality of an alternative that may not yet be possible to instantly imagine or create. It is not embarrassed to argue that fundamental changes to major social institutions, hegemonic cultural norms, and comfortable social and political subjectivities are unlikely to happen through reform or by creating anew as if from scratch; rather, it permits saying that in
some situations radical transformation is required before subsequent reforms can become possible.

The abolitionist politics discussed here are rooted in the long struggles to abolish the African and indigenous American slave trade and chattel slavery in the UK and US during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in subsequent and ongoing movements to abolish white supremacist legal powers, racial segregation, and all systemic causes of racial violence in the US during the twentieth. It took more than a century of political, legal, and cultural struggle to abolish slavery in the United States. It took nearly another to put an end to the legally sanctioned lynching of black people and of public and institutional segregation across the country. Today, the movement to abolish racial dictatorship is far from finished, and the abolitionist tradition remains alive in contemporary anti-racist struggles, including through the abolition of the prison and the ‘abolition of white democracy’ (Davis 2003; Olsen 2004). As Angela Davis points out in advocating for the abolition (rather than the reform) of the American prison, ‘slavery, lynching, and segregation are certainly compelling examples of social institutions that…were once considered to be as everlasting as the sun. Yet, in the case of all three examples, we can point to movements that assumed the radical stance of announcing the obsolescence of those institutions’ (Davis 2003, p. 24).  

In 1857, the African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass highlighted the necessity of this radical stance to an audience of mostly white abolitionists. They had gathered to debate the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies, and many were critical of both slave revolts and black-led resistance movements in the United States. ‘Power concedes nothing without demands,’ Douglass said, and ‘the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.’ Then:
'The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without ploughing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.'

Freedom, according to Douglass, was an artefact of transformations of consciousness and action; a cumulative effect of moments when people striving for democratic possibility have realized that even small improvements are sustained and extended through fundamental and wide-reaching changes, and vice versa. It is also a product of enormous amounts of practical, often mundane, work to transform knowledge systems and rationalities, organizing principles of economic and political affairs, and social relationships – in other words, to alter both the conditions and the parameters of possibility.

Eighty years later, as the struggle to establish conditions for black emancipation in the US continued, the African-American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois again drew attention to the pivotal role of radical social reconstruction in the abolitionist project, which he argued would continue to reproduce the conditions of slavery and the conditions of possibility for slavery as long as it assumed only their negation. Following legal emancipation, he argued, black people faced recovery from ‘one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings, an effort involving universities, history, science, social life and religion,’ as well as (and most explicitly) labour and political institutions (Du Bois 1935a, p. 727). All of
these were therefore recognized as important sites of struggle in the movement, and as important sites for the creation of fronts of possibility. And this possibility was not only understood as being co-operatively produced, but unfolding in a trans-generational political time which exceeded the life spans of many individuals who were involved. Nearly a century after Douglass delivered his speech in New York, for example, and three decades after Du Bois was writing the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed another audience of civil rights activists in Alabama. His theme was the radical re-imagination of the temporality of democratization.

‘I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?"

Somebody’s asking, "How long will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?"

Somebody’s asking, "When will wounded justice, lying prostrate on the streets of Selma and Birmingham and communities all over the South, be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?"

Somebody’s asking, "When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, plucked from weary souls with chains of fear and the manacles of death? How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it?"

[…]

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How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice’ (King 1965).

King understood it was difficult for people to believe, in the midst and wake of so much collective suffering and trauma, that a tendency towards justice exists; people for whom so much time had passed in which there was, as Bertolt Brecht had lamented of a different time, ‘only injustice and no outrage.’ He knew that it was essential for people to understand that there were actually existing pasts and possible futures in which this was not the case. Alongside the actuality of ‘transphysics’ (the spiritual experience of speaking truth to power with the body), he employed pedagogical techniques to make this tendency more visible; for example, by situating the twentieth-century American civil rights movement within a longer trajectory of successful struggles for human freedom and recognition: Biblical stories of liberation, the development of democratic philosophy in ancient Greece, the aesthetic contributions of the Renaissance, the challenging of religious repression during the Reformation, the emancipation of slaves in the United States, and the vindication of humanist values against economic greed during the Great Depression. King could have imagined utopias, but in order to reveal their leading edges in lived experience, he attempted to locate fronts of possibility in the past. This method of unclosing the future by visibilizing its contingency in the past creates a counter-map of possibility which is drawn not by delineating the limits of possibility but by identifying the co-ordinates and contours of their transgressions. For King, militant optimism and educated hope were keystones supporting an ‘arcing’ towards justice in continually dark times.

The history of abolition therefore illustrates that we cannot judge the significance of discrete actions or experiences within the trajectory of an historical project on the basis of its status as
an action or experience in isolation from others. The project of abolishing one form of social life and creating another, perhaps over generations, involves some ‘exciting, agitating [and] all-absorbing’ experiences, as well as moments or periods that feel like failure or like nothing at all. Projects of this magnitude necessitate ongoing learning about the complex nature, uncertain temporality, and ‘untested feasibility’ of collective efforts to transform deep structures of social, cultural, and economic order, and to generate new ways of thinking and being in the absence of empirical evidence that they will become social realities (Freire 2000, p. 102; see also footnote 9). Announcing the obsolescence of a hegemonic historical project is a radicalizing act not only when it enables ‘earnest struggle’ to advance another move, but because even when its effects cannot be immediately known or verified such critique generates spaces of possibility. It also invites us to cultivate a radically democratic kind of

‘decision to believe in what people can be on the basis of what they sometimes are. It is the decision to believe that each polity and each person contains the possibility of a democratic version of itself. It is the belief that as people are free, they are free to become that, too. None of this has been proved, but neither can it be disproved. The move to embrace democratic faith gives one hope and the ability to act, without self-deception about the actual state of things. The gap between the possibility in which the democrat believes and the reality that we have is a wide one; among leaps of faith, this is a long one. That is why, of all faiths, it needs to be the strongest’ (Lummis 1996, p. 153).

Frontier politics and radical democracy
Abolition is a politics of possibility that works towards an on the front; a mode of political practice concerned with what happens at the ‘leading edges’ of possibility. Its raison d’être is to counteract foreclosures of possibility; to create conditions for counter-hegemonic ways of thinking, living, and being to germinate, sprout, and grow roots; and ultimately to re-delineate the parameters of what it is possible to think, say, do, be, and imagine. It is not surprising that there is a regeneration of interest in this spirit of radical-democratic frontier work in neoliberal societies today. Many things which are associated with the idea of radical democracy – an intolerance of foreclosure, a preference for the oppressed and the minor and the margin and the crack, an interest in substances over appearances and fundamentals over symptoms, political and intellectual autonomy from the bottom-up, non-instrumentalized relations of collectivity and affinity, egalitarian and horizontal forms of economic and social organization, the encouragement of creative experimentation, receptivity to otherness and that which is new, a grounding in diverse bodies and identities, a commitment to learning through study and practice, an acceptance of the ethical responsibilities of democracy itself, and above all a commitment to the ordinary and extraordinary work of building real utopias in the present – are simultaneously counter-neoliberal in form and substance, and means for countering neoliberal forms of power. Radical democracy, argues Henry Giroux, ‘must resist all closure while at the same time arguing for those principles and institutions "in which the democratic ideals of equality, freedom and popular control are allowed their most complete sway and fullest application"’ (Giroux 2013, citing Keenan 1997).

Perhaps most importantly, the notion of frontier politics grounds the ambition of changing selves and changing worlds in practice wherever we are; we can find a front at ‘every site that exists as potentiality’ (Gibson–Graham 2006, p. xxxiii). The promises of radical democratization are not the privilege of a few experts in ‘radicalism,’ but everyone’s. They
are for people who need or wish to live in opposition to oppression and foreclosure, and who want to be on the front of emerging alternatives. They belong to all those, as Dewey once wrote, who desire ‘a ‘freer and more human experience in which all share and to which all contribute’ (1939, p. 232).

How can we move from reproducing habitual routines and theories and strategies of change to participating in more radically democratic activities, and from experiencing ‘fugitive’ states of democracy to living more radically democratic lives? How can we create conditions in which radically democratic possibilities emerge and thrive? How do we find the Front? Chapter 4 begins to answer these questions by examining some of the major forms of radical democracy, considering why they are counterhegemonic political forms, and exploring why they potentials of radical democracy are profound and fragile.
References for Chapter 3


King, M. L. K. (1965) ‘Our God is marching on!’ speech delivered in Montgomery, AL, online at http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/our_god_is_marching_on/.


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1 There is a complexity around the concept of the Front which I do not have the space to address in this book, but which needs to be noted. This is that its particular use as a metaphor for the time and place of generating possibility through autonomous action is one of several possibilities, each of which has very different consequences. While its usage here is closest to a materialist version of Hans–Georg Gadamer’s (2004) concept of the ‘horizon,’ the concept could also (although not deliberately) evoke notions of politics as the distinction between friend and enemy (Schmitt 2007), and takes on an almost entirely different radical-democratic meaning in Gloria Anzaldua’s (1987) influential *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

2 Political ontology is the ‘study of how our ontology – our conception of the world as such – conditions what we take to be the ontic possibilities for human collectives’ (Abbott 2012, p. 23). These ontological foundations inform political rationality, which refers more specifically to ‘a way of focusing on certain widely accepted nostrums and theoretical assumptions that currently inform policy making, and provides a useful way of understanding how a number of contemporary governments approach the management of economic security’ (Beeson and Firth 1998).

3 The unthinkability of racial justice in the US during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cannot be overstated. In 1935, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois cited testimony given to the 1866 US Report of Joint Committee on Reconstruction
regarding a white politician’s response to the creation of schools for black children in the south. ‘It was soon after the war that a white member of Johnson's re-stored Louisiana legislature passed one of the schools set up by the Freedmen's Bureau in New Orleans. The grounds were filled with children. He stopped and looked intently, and then asked, "Is this a school?" "Yes," was the reply. "What, for niggers?"

"Evidently." He threw up his hands. "Well, well," he said, "I have seen many an absurdity in my lifetime, but this is the climax!"’ (DuBois 1935, p. 247)