

Anthropological Notes on Judgments of Plausibility  
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Probability has its ground in events the likelihood of which permits of mathematical calculation. Possibility has its ground in the logical negation of necessity. What is plausible need not be probable at all. It must be possible, but the possible state of affairs or event is not always a state of affairs the existence of which or an event the occurrence of which is plausible. Judgments of plausibility rest in stories, in narratives grand or small from one case to the next. The narrative (one at least) that supports the plausibility of the existence of a particular state of affairs or the occurrence of some future event must have the quality of verisimilitude. It must seem realistic--at least to anyone who finds it persuasive. What makes a narrative seem realistic is in part a matter of generic conventions of the sort that Ian Watt has articulated in *the Rise of the Novel*. The reception of a narrative as realistic is, however, far more than a matter of socialization into generic conventions and reception theory as it has unfolded from Hans-Robert Jauss to Stuart Hall has made only general headway in elaborating further the parameters of reception. Personal experience is no doubt important, but the personal is always in good part interpersonal and the interpersonal, the social and cultural conditions that inform the coherence and the emotional register of personal experience--of its "aesthetics" in the ancient sense of that term--remain broadly sketched at best.

Much further research into those conditions strikes me as being imperative to understanding judgments of plausibility (or implausibility) and so to reducing the complexity, the guesswork and the sometimes long stretch of trials and errors that mark exercises in the construction of scenarios. I offer here some of the conditions that bear the most immediate scrutiny. I do so not in the manner of a (short!) laundry list but instead under the presumption that such conditions interact dynamically with one another, that they are among the constituents of a system, if a system of an open and underdetermined sort. 1) Already systemic is class position and Karl Mannheim and Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* the most enduring analysis of its correlations with attitudes toward history, politics and human behavior. Much more conceptually refined, however, is Pierre Bourdieu's conception of class as a combination of material and symbolic capital and any individual's class position the sum of the sorts and amounts of material and symbolic capital at his or her disposal at any particular point in time. Class in this sense includes wealth but also education and the manner in which knowledge is acquired. It coalesces collectively into lifestyles that likely reach beyond the "tastes" that are Bourdieu's primary analytical focus to include a far broader domain of evaluation, the evaluation of plausibility included. 2) Outside the borders of Bourdieu's France are other geopolitically inflected collective experiences that inflect domains of evaluation in turn, not independent of class but together with it. 3) Scenario planners are already aware of the role that particular occupations play in modulating judgments of plausibility--but not sufficiently aware, because we do not have the sorts of intimate and longer-term studies of the formal and informal induction into and the acquisition of competency in and a sense of identification with one or another profession that we would need for a more fully reflective engagement with the "cosmology" specific to a profession from one case to the next.