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UTOPIAN MATERIALITIES

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Abstract

In various ways, this paper makes the counter-intuitive claim that the utopian and the material are thoroughly interdependent, rather than worlds apart. First, through a reading of Thomas More's Utopia, it is argued that Utopia is the product of particular kinds of relations, rather than merely a detachment from the known world. Second, the utopianism of a new economy firm is examined. It is argued that the physical set-up of the firm – in particular the distribution of tables and chairs – evoke a number of alternatives to ordinary work practice. In this way the materialities of the firm are crucial to its persuasive image of being the office of the future. The notion that utopia is achieved through material arrangements is finally related to the analysis of facts and fictions in ANT. It is argued, that even though Utopias are neither fact nor fiction, they are both material and effective on the configuration of networks; Where facts tend to stabilise the network by 'holding' others, Utopias tend to 'push' the network by evoking the possibility of others.

We live in an interesting moment in the history of people and things. In the late 90's there was a widespread sentiment that the rapid development and use of internet technology was about to usher us into a completely new form of life: The information age, the new economy, network society (Castells, Kelly). Today, the IT-bubble has burst, and numerous dot.coms have collapsed. It is now commonplace to believe that the new economy was mostly a 'hype'. People somehow got carried away, their ideas were unrealistic, expectations were way too high. It was all like a gold rush, where only a handful made fortunes whereas a huge number of others were hurt (Kuo, Willim). Everybody, it seemed, were mesmerized by the possibilities of the new technology. They wanted to believe – and they did believe - that marvellous things lay just around the corner. However, at this point in history – 2003 – we have a more realistic appraisal of what the new technology can do for us. The spell of new technology has been lifted. We will not be tricked again.

This paper is about the relationship between the material and the utopian. The text above, a somewhat ironic portrayal of contemporary common sense, suggests at least two possible relationships.

First, there is the 2003 argument, that we can, and indeed must *separate* the material and the utopian. A boundary can be maintained between the real and the imaginary. We can distinguish what is actually there and what people might think or dream is there.

Second, there is the late 90's situation (viewed from 2003). In this case the material and the utopian are *inseparable*. People were not able to separate the real from what was later called the hype. In fact, it seemed that utopian thinking grew directly out to the process of working with new technologies.

What is utopian thinking then? Something distinct from materialities? Or is utopia coextensive with materialities? To begin the exploration of this issue, I will visit the seminal text that invented the term utopia

Thomas More's Utopia – connections and disconnections

Utopia is one of those books, that most people including the present author “know” before they read it. We have heard that Utopia is a portrait of a non-existing ideal society, with no private ownership, on an island far away. In disguise, the book is a harsh critique of the living conditions in England. A criticism that could not be voiced directly without endangering the authors life. Utopia, it seems is something entirely other-worldly, and unreal. A distant dreamworld.

All of this is true. The book utopia does describe a remote island, that is fundamentally different from England. Collective ownership as opposed to private ownership. Cooperation as opposed to exploitation. Decent standards of living for all as opposed to gross inequalities and massive poverty. Criminal sanctions aimed at re-socialization as opposed to capital punishment for minor theft. Religious freedom as opposed to a catholic state.

As is suggested by the location on an island, Utopia, is indeed *separated* from the known world. Is Mores book then simply an extremely long leap into the unknown? No, far from it. What struck me, as I read the book, are the number of subtle ways in which More constructs the connections between Utopia and England.

Linking

First of all, More does not simply plunge into a ‘realist’ description of Utopia. The account of Utopia is spun into a carefully crafted story. In the introduction we learn that the book is a manuscript which More sends his friend Peter Giles in Flandern. Together the two men talked to a

captain, Raphael Hythlodius, one year earlier. It is Hythlodius, who has been to Utopia. And the text is More's best attempt to write up Hythlodius' account, which he now relates to Peter Gilles for comments and corrections. Historians tell us that not only was Peter Gilles a real person, and a friend of Thomas More's. More was also in Flanders around the time suggested in the introduction. In this way, it appears that a number of real elements are used to make a contact point with Hythlodius and his account of Utopia. Utopia is thus located as the next link following a chain of apparently "real" links. One could say that the reader gets going on a number of facts, and Utopia is merely the next step. So even though Utopia is a non-place, it is not disconnected from the known world.

Contrasting

A surprisingly large part of the book *Utopia* discusses English matters directly. Hythlodius, it appears, has visited England and has participated in conversations at the house of John Morton, who held the positions of Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal and English Chancellor. On one occasion, Hythlodius strongly attacked the English laws that sentenced thieves to hanging. He argues that there is no deterring effect, because a large number of people are forced to steal to survive. He also pointed to a number of circumstances which produce this extreme poverty. Soldiers returning from war have no means of subsistence. The Nobility throws out the peasant families from their homes, tear down the farms and villages, and use the land for sheep. Scores of servants and other assistants are fired with no means of subsistence, when they get sick or when their masters die. All of this produces a flood of people who have no other option than stealing. And since hanging is the punishment for stealing as well as for murder, the thieves are almost encouraged by the state to murder the people they steal from, since a dead man doesn't talk. The idea that the English criminal laws will improve society is truly absurd. Hythlodius argues that the Utopian system is more humane, and more beneficial to the state. Thieves must pay back what they stole, and in addition they are forced to work for the state, while their basic needs are taken care of. When they have worked hard and long, they are given their freedom back.

What does this tell us about the relationship between Utopia and the England? It appears that the existence of Utopia is somehow implied in the way matters are handled in England. Hythlodius exposes the absurdity of the English punitive system, and in so doing, he strongly suggests, that a different state of affairs is – must be – possible. Utopia is *the other*, which becomes visible when

the English system is pressed. The utopian is yet again, something which is constructed in a particular relation to the known world, a contrasting relation. It is not a detached island.

Specifics

More's book is filled with peculiar details. An example: More asks Peter Giles for his opinion about the length of the bridge over the river Anydrus by Amaurotum. In More's recollection, Hythlodius said 500 steps, but More's house teacher, who was also present at their meeting, believes that the correct distance is 200 steps.

What is the function of these kinds of specifics? When speculating about this, I was reminded of an old friend of mine. His favourite kind of fun, is to make people believe in spectacular lies. His trick is always the same. He boosts his stories with all kinds of gullible details, which effectively turns the listeners attention away from the big issue. A similar mechanism is used by More. When told about the possible length of a bridge, one tends to forget to question the existence of the river, the city, not to mention the island itself.

More's text treats the island as a fact, that can be taken for granted in the discussion of other matters (cf. Latour & Woolgar). In this way, the specifics carry the reader downstream, and in so doing they confirm and support the possible existence of Utopia.

Let me sum up this exploration of Utopia. Thomas More's Utopia is the archetypal description of an ideal state. However, it appears that Utopia is not a free-standing existence, but rather something which is carefully crafted through particular kind of connections to the known world. I have pointed out three rhetorical strategies deployed by More. Utopia is 'reached' by making it the next small step in a series of well established facts. Utopia is made obvious by exposing the absurdities of its other. Utopia is made something to be taken for granted by making it the premise for further discussions.

Let us contemplate this for a moment. Utopia is not about the disconnected but rather about particular ways of making connections. If we accept this, then it must also be possible to analyse the extra-ordinary feat of utopian thinking in the so-called new economy. What sort of devices - rhetorical or otherwise - were used to construct these utopias.

In the following, I will analyse the case of a new economy firm. I will draw on the previous reading of More's Utopia, but I will look for further explanatory resources than merely rhetorical ones. As will become clear I am particularly inspired by material-semiotic analyses developed by ANT.

United Spaces – The Office of the Future

United Spaces was a company that identified itself as a part of the new economy. It started in Stockholm in November 1999. A second office was opened in Copenhagen May 2000. 18 months later, the Danish office was closed due to financial difficulties. The Stockholm office is still operating. Basically, United Spaces is an office hotel, it rents office space to other companies on a monthly basis. But the form and the conditions of office space are extra-ordinary: The Danish United Spaces, which I know well¹, was located in very attractive building at the harbour front. The office was inhabited by about 45 small firms, many of these in consulting and IT. The most eye-catching feature of the place was a large open office space referred to as the networking arena. This arena contained 90 workstations scattered over the floor in smaller groups. The members of United Spaces were expected to seat themselves and their laptops at a new desk everyday. In this way, management argued, networking between the companies would flourish. So United Spaces were not merely office space. It was also a networking office, or an experiment in building a community of businesses.

Believing

United Spaces generated a significant amount of positive press. In February 2001, I went through the complete pile of press clippings², and did not find a single critical comment on United Spaces. No one questioned that United Spaces was able to generate network and knowledge sharing between firms. And no one seemed to question that United Spaces was indeed the office of the future.

A few citations will convey the positive spirit of the Danish Business Journalists:

“Not only do the members buy office space, ideals and network. They also buy a ticket to a future oriented project in general the concept works for people with different backgrounds, agendas and ages. In each their way, they use the place and the competencies of each other. “

¹ I was a member of United Spaces for a month, and did a full-time participant observation. See Elgaard Jensen (2003)

² I am grateful to Rikke Prenter, assistant manager at United Spaces, who made this material available to me.

(Politiken, 12.5.2002)

“The office community United Spaces ... is not just a work place, but a place where people share knowledge and use each other. “ (Job.Karriere 6.9.2001)

“Diary from the Workplace of the Future” “Inspiring neighbours, perfect location and attractive functional surroundings are the main reasons to rent a place at United Space – a community of businesses” (Ingeniøren, 11.1.2002)

“Community Inspires” “ .. The open office plan will inspire the ‘inhabitants’ to seek inspiration and help from each other. In this way their network and customer base will grow”. (SAS Magasinet, January/February 2002)

“They See the Future” “United Spaces .. with its 1.100 square meters open glass office is the latest take on the meeting place of the future” (metroXpress, 21.9.2001)

“Paradise for Young Innovators” “New concept offers innovators an office environment that resembles a virtual network” (Søndagsavisen, 17.6.2001)

“A New Mekka for the Innovators of the New Economy” (Børsen Informatik, 22.5.2001)

Perhaps it is little surprise that the accounts of United Spaces were positive. All of the journalists interviewed the manager who was charged with selling the place. If the journalists went on to interview members, these were frequently handpicked by the manager. Moreover, it is well known that stories about glamorous and exciting new things is the infotainment stuff that sells newspapers. However, it is still striking that the United Spaces was so convincing. Journalists were not forced to be overly positive, but perhaps they were seduced. In a similar way, it is my impression from talking to members at US, and several others who visited, that the place was truly appealing. People (including myself) *wanted* to believe in United Spaces.

The hard question is why. Why did people so often believe that they saw the future of work, when they saw this place. What generated this utopian effect?

Welcome to United Spaces

Let us imagine that you, the reader of this text, is a freelance consultant who is looking for an office space³. You have phoned the manager of United Spaces and he has invited you to come and see the place.

The manager, a friendly and energetic man in his 30's, meets you in the door. He welcomes you and asks some questions about your area of consulting and your interests. He invites you to hang your coat, and little by little he starts telling about the place.

He walks back toward the entrance and shows you the small panel, where you use a key card. He tells you that all members have a keycard, which allows them to enter the building at any time - 24 hours a day. The keycard also fits the door in United Spaces' Stockholm office. As a member in Copenhagen, you are allowed to use the facilities in Stockholm 5 days a month. The idea is to open more 'United Spaces' in other capitals. Amsterdam will probably be the next.

The manager explains that the area, which you have just entered is not a reception proper, it is a café area as indicated by a bar desk, café tables and a automatic hot drinks machine. When the companies have guests, they have to pick them up themselves. Then he tells you, that it is important to create visibility for the firms. He points to the wall right opposite the entrance. On this wall all the company logos are printed on box-shaped light fittings in bright colours.

The manager then shows you a metal board where several of the firms have made A5 size posters explaining or advertising their company. He also points to a board with Polaroid pictures of all the faces in United Spaces. Name and company are written below each photograph.

You look at the display of companies and faces. Most people seem to be in their 20's or 30's a few people are older. Perhaps you recognise someone. If you ask the manager, you will find that he is quite well-informed about 'the members' as he calls them. He might also tell you that there are about 45 companies or individual consultants, but there are still empty seats.

Together you walk a little further down the hall. The manager shows you some brightly coloured lockers on each side of the hall. He shows you, that each locker has a slot, which makes it function as a letterbox, and furthermore there is a socket inside each locker, so you can recharge your laptop overnight. You start to get the impression, that United Spaces is a carefully designed place.

As you continue down the hall, a number of conference rooms come into view. They all have glass walls and on the outside they are covered with horizontal wooden lamellae at varied distances. The effect is similar to Venetian blinds; you can see what is going on in the conference rooms, but people in there are not 'at display' as fish in a fish tank. As you pass, you see that two meetings are going on, and in a third room a woman is walking up and down the floor talking in her mobile phone.

You and the manager continue and pass a room with printers and photocopiers. The manager explains, that printing, faxing and photocopying is included in the monthly rent.

Now you enter the large open office space, which the manager refers to as the 'networking arena'. You look across a large rectangular room. It is dominated by workstations (70 altogether). There is a wooden floor and a concrete ceiling. Large panorama windows on the right wall make the room very light. Along the left wall, there is a series of small conference rooms. The manager tells you that the idea is that everybody clears their desk at night, and sits in a new place the next day. In that way you will automatically meet a broad array of people, companies and competencies.

³ The following tour is a hybrid constructed out of my own presentation to the place, my tagging along several presentations with the manager, my interview with the account manager about a typical presentation, and the reading of a number of journalistic account of United Spaces based on presentations.



The Networking Arena

The manager then takes you to one of the work stations. It consists of a relatively small table about the height of a bar table. In front of it there is a transparent Plexiglas screen. Between the screen and the table there is a small lamp, and sockets for electrical plugs. Each workstation comes with a office chair – tall as a bar stool - and a roller cabinet. The workstations are on two wheels, so they can be moved to a different place in the room. Interspersed on the floor are sockets from which electricity for the workstations is pulled. The manager explains that everything is based on mobile phones and laptops. As a member you get at a PCMCIA-card that allows you to connect wirelessly and quickly⁴ to the server. So you can take your laptop anywhere in the building and still send documents to the printer, or use the internet. The manager also tells that he has negotiated discount with the largest Danish telecommunications company, which makes mobile phone calls from United Spaces as cheap as hard wired phones.

Though impressed by the technical solutions, you are a bit concerned about limited size of the tables and the obligation to move to a new place every day. You ask the manager if people are having problems with space and with moving around all the time. He answers, that it does take a bit of adjustment to have a small table. You can off course store papers in your roller cabinet, but it does requires some discipline. However, it is also a productive exercise to clear up every night – in that way you don't collect a lot of mess, and it helps you be organised. It is also refreshing to keep moving about and you meet new people. You don't grow roots in one particular place. He assures

⁴ 2 Mbit Internet access.

you that everybody has got used to it and is fine with it. But of course, if you are not interested in meeting other people there is no point in coming to United Spaces.

The tour is about to end. You walk up six steps to a relaxation area, which the manager calls the “Zen Zone”. There is a large sofa a number of very comfortable deck chairs in front of the large windows. There is a magnificent view of the harbour, the Royal library on the opposite quay and behind it the copper spire on the Parliament. The manager invites you to take a seat, while he gets a couple of coffees from the café/kitchen areas next to the Zen Zone. You sit down and ponder if United Spaces might be the future workplace for you.

The future of work before your very eyes

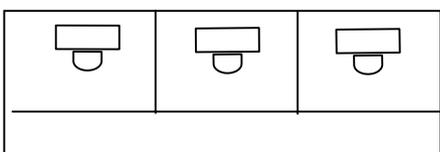
From this tour is it clear that there are a number of good reasons to like United Spaces. The location in downtown Copenhagen, the view of the harbour, the fully equipped office, a space to work where you may move in and begin tomorrow. However, for the purpose of the present paper, I will try to focus sharply on the *utopian* appeal of the place. What persuaded people that United Spaces were not merely a nice office, but indeed the ideal office of the future?⁵

I suggest, we take a closer look at the tables. What are tables? Among other things, tables are devices that configure relations between bodies and work.

This is indicated in a number of expressions: The proposal was taken off the table. This is not on my table. This turns the tables. It was done under the table.

It is possible to express - or should one say perform – a number of ideal relationships by simply drawing people and tables. Four examples:

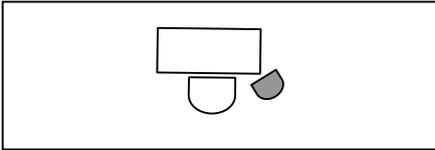
A. Bureaucratic specialisation, cf. Weber:



The work is on either your table, or on mine. Matters are separated and processed separately.

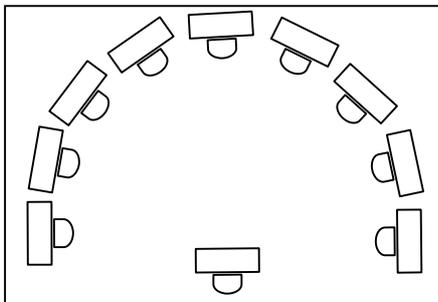
⁵ In the language games of the new economy, the future, the ideal and hence Utopia tend to be synonymous.

2. Communities of practice, cf. Lave & Wenger:



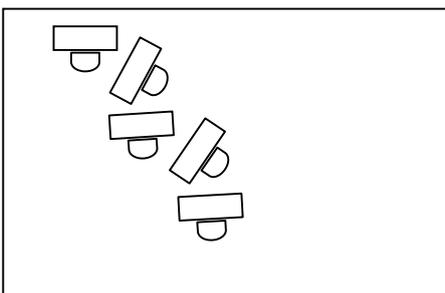
Lave & Wenger theory of social learning is fundamentally the claim that it is possible to place apprentices in positions where they can look mature practitioners over the shoulder, while contributing in minor ways to the collective practice. Working at the same project/table, but from different positions is thus the premise of this benevolent arrangement.

3. Surveillance, cf. Foucault:



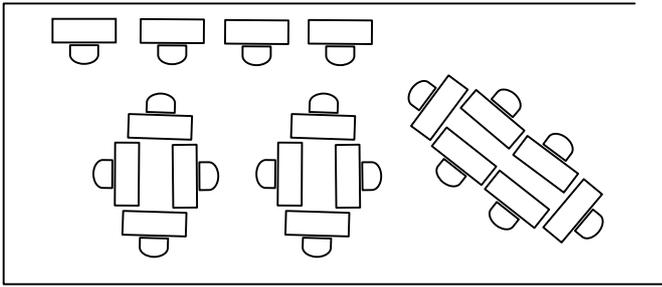
Subjects are arrayed so that everything can be seen from one central position, and in such a way that the individual subject is unable to see whether he is being observed.

4. Parasitism, cf. Serres



For Serres the unfair exchange is the basic mechanism of life. Everybody takes from others and is taken from themselves. A little thief is always lurking behind your back. Sometimes the chain of parasites is broken or wiped out. But it only takes a moment before the parasites creep back in.

At United Spaces the tables were arranged in the following way:



The tables were on two wheels, so that they could be 'wheelbarrowed' to new position. This, I was told, happened roughly every second month. But the two basic elements in the formation were constant. There were (1) tables side by side along the wall and (2) tables in small inwardly facing groups.

Note first of all that the table arrangements at US is *different* from all of the ones above. This is, as one would expect from a new form of work. However, it might even be argued, that the arrangement of table at US performs a strategy similar to the contrasting strategy deployed by Thomas More; by indicating absurdities in the English laws, he suggested that not-absurd – utopian – laws were possible. In the same way, I will argue that arrangement of chairs at US hold out the promise that absurdities in a number of other material-social arrangements may be overcome.

Let us make the contrasts one by one.

The other of bureaucracy

Standard criticisms of bureaucracies would be something like this: Matters cannot always be separated. People are utterly bored by working alone. Bureaucracies cannot adjust to rapidly developing environments.

Imagine looking at the networking arena with this in the back of your mind: At this place it must be possible to combine and separate things in a flexible manner (no walls). It must be possible to adjust quickly (no fixed seats). And the social stimulation must be very satisfying (people all around).

The other of communities of practice

Social learning theory describes a world consisting of communities of practice. These communities gradually socialise new members and thereby reproduce themselves. Development does take place, but only gradually. An obvious criticism of this social arrangement would focus on rapid change and innovation. How is it possible to make wild combinations if you are surrounded by the normative pressures of socialisation? How is it possible to make a side-step or a wild jump ahead, if the only

way forward is to look over the shoulder of the master? And isn't the authority of expertise much overrated in this turbulent world of ours?

The networking arena seems to hold an alternative. Here the roles of master and apprentice are not ingrained in the architecture. Instead the tables suggest that anyone can learn from anyone else. You may sit side by side and look over each others shoulders. Or you may sit face to face and combine your resources between you, so to speak.

The other of surveillance

Surveillance in the crude, panoptic form of Bentham's ideal prison hardly exists in contemporary organisations. But working life is continuously subject to vast number of registrations, controls and regulations from management as well as from public authorities. (A recent account of this ubiquitous texture of regulatory regimes may be found in Strathern's "Audit Cultures".)

It is not hard to imagine a primitive yearning for a moment of rest from these imagined or real surveyors. And it is also not hard to imagine that United Spaces holds the promise of this freedom. Look again at the distribution of tables. They are placed side by side along the wall, or in inwardly facing clusters. This configuration effectively removes the chance that someone watches you from behind. The eyes, that might look at you, can always be found in front of you, or on either side within your visual field; Never behind your back. The distribution of tables is thus an *inter-opticon* – a machine for creating mutual visibility. It holds the promise of an empowered individual. A working life set free from surveillance regimes and internalised threats. A working life where others are clearly visible and can be dealt with face to face.

The other of parasitism

Serres portrait of parasitism alerts us to the endless little distortions, abuses, misrepresentations and thefts that make up the fabric of life. This parallels a widespread worry among businesses large and small that they may be abused by other businesses. And there is indeed a lot to worry about: sketchy ideas, concepts, valuable information, customers, or even employers may be stolen or lured away at any moment. Suspicion rather than trust is the order of the day. How then, can anyone believe that it is possible to make 45 small innovative companies live together in the same room⁶? Again, the tables suggest the possibility of utopia.

Notice the location of the parasite in the drawing. The parasite is close and operates in the blind angle just behind your visual field. Notice then, the location of the tables in the networking arena.

⁶ In Elgaard Jensen (2003), I explore the daily practice of living together with other companies at United Spaces.

The possibility of sitting close to someone in their blind angle is effectively closed. Blind angles are always 'filled' with empty floor. The networking arena, it seems, configures a form of social life, where parasitism is absent.

Let me sum up the argument. People came to United Spaces, they saw an attractive office, they saw a 'networking arena' where 2/3 of the seats were empty, and they heard the manager's sales talk. But more often than not, people also ended up seeing an utopian ideal. They saw the office of the future and the future of work life. This utopian effect, I argue, is achieved because the manager's sales talk had a very strong ally (cf. Latour 1991). His talk about the future was enforced by the material arrangement that people saw before their very eyes. I suggest that the distribution of tables performed a possible future of work, in a way that parallels Thomas More's rhetorical strategy of contrasting. The tables suggested that bodies and work could be arranged in a new way that effectively would overcome some of the absurdities of 'normal' working life. It seemed possible to overcome the stiffening effects of bureaucracy and a social structure gravitating around established expertise. I also seemed possible to escape from regimes of surveillance and to interact in freedom and trust without fear of abuse.

The argument here is not that United Spaces actually achieved this utopia. The argument is merely that the possibility was raised, and that particular social-material arrangements were crucial in convincing visitors that an alternative was possible to normal forms of work, and normal forms working problems. The construction of this view into the ideal future was thus not merely an effect of ordering matters within the skulls of the visitors. The ordering of office materialities were a crucial element in the construction of Utopia.

On facts and fictions

To this point, this paper has been an exercise in analysing the utopian effect of materialities. It is a move away from the positions that takes utopias to be products of human minds racing ahead, and materialities to be a slow and primitive creatures frustrated in their attempt to catch up. Instead, I hope to have exemplified that utopian effects are generated by heterogeneous materials every step of the way. Materialities cannot be subtracted from the utopian, and the utopian cannot be subtracted from materialities. The latter means, that the burst of the IT-bubble does not leave us with a 'sober' view of technology. Technology and other materialities always enter into 'debates', as evidence for something, or as evidence for the possibility of the *opposite* of something.

Technology and its potential is never something in itself. It is always a function of its location in a network.

The claim that things achieve their qualities as a consequence of their location in a network is directly inspired by ANT. This theoretical tradition has done a significant amount of work on the nature of materialities and facts. In the following, I will give a brief account of ANT's view of facts, and relate it to the present account of utopias.

It is illuminating to think of ANT's theory of facts as an alternative to philosophical position known as correspondence theory. Correspondence theory draws a sharp line between the material world out there, and our linguistic representations of the world. A fact, then is a linguistic representation that corresponds directly to an element of the outside world. A fiction is of course a linguistic creation that lacks this correspondence. Correspondence theory thus assumes a number of exclusive binaries. There is nothing between fact and fiction – there is either correspondence or not. And there is nothing between language and world – they are separate realms.

Based on anthropological investigations of laboratories, ANT takes the exact opposite viewpoint. ANT claims that the separation of facts and fiction as well as the separation of words and things, are the hard-won *outcomes* of long negotiation processes. A messy middle ground of hybrids is the stuff that populates the daily practice of science – to claim otherwise is to engage in armchair philosophy.

For the sake of the argument, it is necessary to go into some more detail with the process of constructing scientific facts. I will use here the seminal text by Latour & Woolgar (1979/1986).

L&W portrays a scientific laboratory (neuroendocrinology) as a factory that produces literary inscriptions. The inputs to this factory are animals, chemicals and various other raw materials. The output is a number of scientific papers. Between the input and output there is a chain of events. In each event some matter is transformed into some sort of inscription (a mark, a number, a graph). In the next event this inscription becomes the material for a further transformation, that results in a new inscription.

A key role in this process is played by so-called inscription devices, which are instruments that are able to transform substances to inscriptions. Another crucial step is when the final product of meticulous laboratory work - cleaned up inscription - is carried into the professor's desk. At his desk, various materials are related. On the one hand articles published in scientific journals. On the other hand inscriptions that are produced in-house. Latour & Woolgar argue that new articles are written by juxtaposing and relating new and old inscriptions. The new inscriptions are used to solidify or undermine statements from the existing literature. L&W propose a 5-level taxonomy of the fact-like status of a particular statement *X*.

1. *It has been speculated that X* (the statement is identified as a conjecture)
2. *In general it seems that X* (attention is drawn to the tentativeness of the statement)
3. *X is indicated by Y and Z* (the statement is accepted but located in specific circumstances)
4. *X* (the statement is a matter of fact that speaks for itself – no context needed)
- 5 ... (*X* is an unspoken assumption, taken for granted for knowledge)

A new paper contains a number of statements with various levels of facticity. L&W argue that the vast majority of statements in the scientific literature figure in the middle of this taxonomy (2-4). Scientific debate is a huge cloud of statements that are constantly nudged up and down by new articles. Statement from earlier articles may be cited without their circumstances, and thus moved from level 3 to level 4. Or statements at level 4 in one article may be diminished by later articles that draw attention to their circumstances of production, or evidence to the contrary. In this way, the scientific literature operates like a huge cloud of vibrating and colliding statements. Latour & Woolgar likens it to Brownian agitation – the random movements of particles suspended in a gas or liquid.

In a few rare instance a statement is so seriously undermined that it sinks to level 1, never to be taken up again. Sometimes a statement gather more and more support. Articles begin to make statement the premise for further arguments. The statement may be reified in technology (inscription devices). And it may finally be printed in text books. In this case a scientific fact has been constructed.

Latour & Woolgar's account of science assumes that facts develop when more and more relations are added to a node in the network. In this way the node becomes more and more real. The real is

thus a construction, that is woven out of many weak strings. The real is not given in the order of things.

It is interesting, although difficult, to locate Utopia in this model of facts. Could it be that Utopia is identical to the fictions at level 1 - something entirely unsupported. In a sense, the lack of support *is* the trademark of utopia. Utopias are not –like facts - solidly woven into things. Utopias travel light. But on the other hand, what doesn't fit, is Latour & Wolgaar's remark, that statements at level 1 are abandoned. Utopias seem to stay in the game and play an important role, despite their lack of total support.

Perhaps then Utopia lives in the middle numbers (2-3). It is a statement with some support, struggling to gain more support and turn itself into a fact⁷. It makes sense to think about United Spaces in these terms. A company with an idea that may be questioned. But also a company that constantly tries to gain support for its idea by attracting more customers, by generating more good press, and by making money. Like science, United Spaces works meticulously to build on established facts and pile up the evidence. I mentioned earlier, that Thomas More uses a rhetorical strategy, which I called linking. The first figure in the story is Thomas More (fact), then enters Peter Giles (another real person) and finally Hythlodius (a fictitious person?).

In the same way the manager of United Spaces argues: First we opened in Stockholm (fact), now we have opened in Copenhagen (fact), soon we will open in Amsterdam (?).

There is no doubt that the utopias examined in this paper play the fact-game some of the way⁸. But other games are used as well. The contrasting strategy, which seems pivotal, is not about little meticulous steps. It is about generating a flash effect of a possible alternative, fuelled by the absurdities of the existing.

The utopian contrasting strategy does not fit well with L&W model of fictions and facts (a cloud of Brownian agitation, facts are slowly secreted). If this is a problem, then I suggest that the problem lies in the root metaphor used by ANT. ANT view the world as a material semiotic network, where certain actants manage to make themselves real, big, solid, irresistible, indisputable, powerful and the rest by lending the force of others. The world is made when actants manage to hold others in

⁷ Latour (1996) is an account of a utopian transportation system in these terms.

place. *Holding* it appears is the key metaphor of action. If an actant holds on to more and more supporters, it will become a fact. If it loses its grip, it decomposes and slips into a mere fiction.

But holding is not necessarily the only ‘act’ that influences the configuration of network. Perhaps *pushing* is a metaphor that better covers what utopias do. By evoking alternatives, they shake things up and they push established facts around. In this way they make a difference, even though they never gain the solidity of facts.

In contemporary world of politics this makes terribly good sense. Does anyone really believe that the spindoctors game will stop, and we will at some time get a firm *grip* of the facts? Do we believe that the lies of Bush, Blair and Rasmussen prior to the war on Iraq will be exposed and that they will be *held* accountable? Or is it more likely, that they will have turned the tables, and *pushed* the agenda on to something else before that will ever happen?

The suggestion here is that reality is configured by holding facts and as well as by pushing utopias. My hope is that we can find ways to bring both of these aspects to our studies of the materiality of organising.

⁸ Thomas More’s use of *specifics* resembles fact-building even closer.

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