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Researching for Desirable Futures: From Real Utopias to Imagining Alternatives

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Moments of crisis may serve as critical junctures for imagining alternatives. As the future has become increasingly volatile and precarious in these unsettled times of pandemic, climate emergency, rising inequality and an ever looming digital (r)evolution, there is a great need and opportunity to develop theory that can guide society towards its future potentialities. But how can we theorize what does not (yet) exist? A central task would be to develop methodological strategies that make the future amenable to empirical study. This is quite ambitious. In this essay we seek to take one of many steps and advocate for such (re-)search for the future, where acts of (disciplined) imagination become input for theory building.

Calls abound for us management scholars to assume a more engaged societal role by breaking away from a narrow, paradigm-driven 'theory fetish' and instead, contribute to solving grand challenges and societal problems (Biggart, 2016). We do not see this as an either/or. It is time for us as management scholars to use the methodological and theoretical toolkit at our disposal to co-create the future; and to actively feed forward soci(et)al change – not despite theory, but through it.

However, the future poses some peculiar problems: By definition, it is not here yet. Thus, the quest to contribute to the construction of a future social reality by theorizing it raises some fundamental questions: Do we actually need to wait until something exists before we can build theories about it? Or can we ex ante theorize a post-COVID-19 world or think through the consequences of a society radically shaped by artificial intelligence? To put it differently, the conundrum we face is the following: As an empirical social science, management scholarship deals with the social world as it exists and came to be; our methodological tools are based on data sourced from observable events that have already occurred. Thus, how can we study, conceptualize, and theorize what is not

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(yet) observable and does not (yet) exist? Could we indeed build valid theories based on acts of imagination?

When management scholars engage with the future, their aim is commonly to anticipate possible futures through predictive analysis. But anticipating or predicting a *probable* future is not our aim. Instead, we seek to articulate *desirable* futures, and how they might become reality. There are two reasons for this. First, our analytic capabilities to predict the future will likely be dwarfed by the predictive strength of corporate research. Big technology companies like Alphabet, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft employ thousands of researchers to analyse masses of data, often routinely harvested as a by-product of digital traces for machine learning. As a result, the methodological innovations needed to describe, analyse, and predict human behaviour are no longer championed by academic scholars but by capitalist institutions whose aim it is to generate profits (Savage and Burrows, 2007). Their increasingly powerful methods turn behavioural data into what Shoshana Zuboff calls 'prediction products' that not only predict our behavioural futures but also intervene in them. Outperformed by corporate research, we may find ourselves subjected to profitable but dystopian future developments.

Second, predicting the future is not (good) enough. Rather than trying to compete over who can make better predictions and build better models, we need to reclaim our societal relevance by redefining our purpose in engaging with the future altogether. A central aim must be to create more desirable futures. However, the prevailing approaches to predicting or anticipating the future in management studies lack such a critical reflection on their normative orientation. For instance, scenario planning is a popular heuristic tool in strategic management that primarily aims at generating various plausible scenarios for emerging futures. But it is precisely the elaboration, critical reflection, and theorizing on futures that are not just plausible and probable but also desirable where we believe that scholarship can make a difference and reclaim its societal relevance. Rather than extrapolating to future states of the world from our present, what we also need is research guiding normative conceptions of the future. The aim would be to create new future visions – strengthened through theory – that open up radically new prospects for human agency to shape the world.

This ambition poses an obvious methodological difficulty: If the aim is to open up future potentialities that break away from the present, how can we do this using the tools of scientific analysis? The methodological challenge we hence face is to generate critical knowledge for the future with data sourced from the present. As social scientists, we commonly study the social structures of our prevailing era (Abbott, 2001). Empirical data exists as soon as the phenomenon of inquiry has happened. Thus, data gathering and analysis is backward looking. The predominant institutional infrastructures and settled practices that we examine also constrict, limit and in fact imprison our thinking and theorizing. But we want to look forward. And to do so, we need to free ourselves from our own cognitive and methodological chains. Can we do so while maintaining standards of academic rigor?

FROM REAL UTOPIAS TO ACTS OF IMAGINATION

One response is to study *real utopias*. Real utopias exist on the fault line between 'dreams and practice' (Wright, 2010, p. 3). They are *utopian* because they involve developing

visions of future alternatives to predominant institutions. But they are also *real* because they are rooted in the potentialities of the present. To study real utopias, many of us have focused on alternative forms of organizing, such as spiritual, ecological, and social collectives, communities, and cooperatives that exist on the periphery of the mainstream. They demonstrate, on a small scale, what could be possible. Yet, the main practical and conceptual challenge with these alternative forms of organizing is precisely that they are 'alternatives'; they take the form of small-scale social enclaves on the periphery. They need to be 'translated' for the centre of society, or scaled up, without losing the essence of what rendered them inspiring visions of the future in the first place. Still, focusing on concrete examples of real utopias allows us to access existing empirical data while also generating novel insights into the possibilities for creating more sustainable or equitable future organizations. We as academics can then co-create social change towards a desirable future by theorizing and legitimizing its occurrence on the fringes.

We believe that there is another way of researching the future that goes beyond the search for existing empirical alternatives: feeding forward soci(et)al change through acts of imagination about the future. Imagination refers to the ability to form pictures in one's mind of something that cannot be immediately sensed or that has not been previously perceived: the irreal, unreal, and surreal. Imagining is making the absent present. However, the validity of theories based on imagination cannot be tested against the empirical present and might be deemed pseudo-science. Such acts of imagination, therefore, require a new methodological toolkit to achieve *speculative rigor*. As an academic approach, we need *disciplined imagination* not only of what is feasible and probable, but also of what is desirable.

Acts of imagination can be radical because they depart from a reliance on empirical data about the present and venture into the domain of imagination. Such research must logically be based on forms of fictional empirical data. It may be found in places of 'forethought', including calls for action and manifestos, such as 'democratizing work' or 'decolonizing the university'. These are, by definition, still fictional. If we do not wish to wait until something exists in order to theorize it, then how can we build valid theories based on disciplined imagination while maintaining scholarly rigor? How we respond to this question has important methodological implications for the possibilities of empirical inquiry and the purpose of theory building – to which we turn next.

(RE-)SEARCHING FOR THE FUTURE

As a starting point to develop methodological strategies that make acts of imagination amenable to empirical study, we see two pathways. The first pathway would start from alternatives that already exist at the fringes of the mainstream – real utopias – and imagine what impact a broader or even universal reach would have. In other words, we need to examine what would happen if utopian social enclaves scaled up and became widespread reality. For instance, some organizations already organize themselves in a circular fashion, but how would an entire economy be organized to achieve circularity? Or how could pervasive self-driving cars transform mobility and improve – or worsen – human behaviour?

The second pathway would seek ways to explore imagined alternatives that do not (yet) exist. For instance, how would our modes of organizing be impacted if artificial intelligence came closer to the threshold of singularity? What would further gene manipulation or advancements in robotics mean for organizations and work? By exploring developments before they are reality, these mind-made imaginaries can open up possibilities, inspire, and orient action. Thus, they have a pre-prefigurative potential; they allow us to imagine the enactment of visions of the future and also 'backcast' socio-political practices that would permit prefiguring such a future.

To begin this process of imagining, we could engage with central grand challenges of our time by studying social movements such as Fridays for Future or Black Lives Matter in greater detail. Research could imagine their demands being materialized and ponder upon how this would impact society. Such research would require future-perfect thinking – thinking backwards from a possible future. It could imagine an ecotopia where all resources are renewable, sourced from cradle to cradle in a circular economy and then, ask: What does it mean for individuals, organizations and society – and our theorization thereof? It would not only analyse Martin Luther King's speech but also explore what would happen if his dreams of a racism-free world became true. Such narratives are aspirations for a better world through ideas whose time have not (yet) come. Many describe states of human flourishing and well-being, socio-political equality, human-nature symbiosis, and human-centred technological progress.

We could also focus on new 'research sites', where acts of imagination take place and where actors engage in projective deliberation in community forums, social movements, citizen dialogues or policy arenas with the aim of imagining and elaborating possible futures. Mische (2009, p. 437) calls such settings 'sites of hyper-projectivity', that is, 'sites of heightened, future-oriented public debate about possible futures'. Her work uses textual analysis to study deliberations of future projections at the People's Summit and the UN Conference of Sustainable Development. This allowed her to appreciate the plurality of future-oriented narratives as a source of reflective learning, alternative pathways, and imaginative reformulation. As management scholars we could simulate such sites of hyper-projectivity. We could expand our methodological toolkit using future-oriented living labs, that is, 'future labs' that act as such spaces for the creation of thought experiments or utopian thinking. The advantage of studying such sites is that their externalization in actors' talk, text, expressions and narratives make imagined futures visible and empirically accessible. Analysis could focus on the fictional stories, scenarios, or maps for action that are constructed conversationally. To be sure, we would need to be aware that imagination is contingent on the dynamics of interaction and experiment with settings that encourage acts of imagination. In contrast to conventional methods, such as Delphi studies, which try to serve as oracles that forecast and predict future realities as accurately as possible, acts of imagination do not try to predict probable futures but to articulate desirable futures and then, 'backcast' as to how they might become more likely. While multiple methods aim to forecast a future and examine feasibility and probability, we see a need for acts of imagination in particular related to desirability.

As a research method, acts of imagination certainly require boundary setting: not everything goes. Hence, such work requires the development of methodological frames and engagement with questions such as: How did the imaginary arise? What are its

preconditions? Can others follow the reflexive imaginary? How significant is it? When embracing a normative dimension, questions of plurality, participation, and (re-)presentation also need to be addressed.

PERFORMATIVITY, PREPAREDNESS, AND PATH CRITIQUE

What would be the implications for theory building? Here, we suggest that we would need to revisit the very purpose of theory building. The aim of building theories based on acts of disciplined imagination is not to represent observable facts or predict probable futures. Instead, the aim is to perform desirable futures by theorizing them. Performativity, 'the constitution of new worlds through their articulation' (Garud and Gehman, 2019, p. 680), would not be the (unintended) by-product of theorizing but a deliberative choice. In other words, theory building would seek to unleash the performative potential of imagination – the production of theories that may become real because people act on them and thereby shape social reality, rather than represent or predict it. Performative research must embrace a normative orientation because it anticipates and seeks for theories to become real (Marti and Scherer, 2016). This involves generating theories that have the potential to perform what can be deemed as desirable futures. This could range from theorizing the consequences of what many deem to be desirable concepts such as the 4-day working week, universal basic income, or the circular economy and translating them into concrete organizational practices, to theorizing the future of management in the context of ecological utopias or a post-racial, post-binary gender or post-national society. By articulating how radical ideas can become real and theorizing the forms of organizing that would realize them, they can no longer be dismissed as 'unrealistic'. We could present and discuss them in mainstream debates as possible and doable alternatives, teach them to our students, and ultimately legitimize them as *within* the realms of possibility.

Imagination as a tool for performative research would thereby seek to better prepare for potentialities. It would allow research to foreshadow rather than just 'backshadow'. It is a form of what-if theorizing. Thinking through the consequences of the 'what-if' could allow us to decide upon more desirable pathways. For instance, by theorizing the consequences of organizations managed through AI before its widespread use, we could identify the differences between paths towards an AI utopia from an AI dystopia and help mobilize the socio-political resources for creating the former. Or it could prepare us for 'rebound effects' before they occur; for instance when climate-friendly efficiency gains through digitalization are cancelled out by more consumption and energy use. By theorizing design principles such as 'digital sufficiency', we can offer analytical tools to guide and justify interventions into emerging digital architectures, and contribute towards making digitalization work for climate change. What-if theorizing would also help us to prepare for crises. While health scientists had developed models for pandemics such as COVID-19, we management scholars were rather rushed to think about its consequences. Instead, we could have imagined something similar to COVID-19 and produced scholarly insights ex ante. This would have had the benefit of enabling better preparation for time-consuming research and giving us a head start, which is especially important for times of crisis.

Imagination as a tool for performative research would also allow us to reflect in prospective hindsight, to be a critical instrument to interrogate the present and identify pathways towards imagined futures. Such path critique gives rise to a critical gaze that looks backward from an imagined future to examine potential steps towards it and its implications. By imagining what could be possible, we can also better critique the seeming inevitability of the status quo and overcome the limitations of mere analytical extrapolation from the present. Such prospective hindsight offers us means to reflect backwards from an imagined future.

Finally, how might we evaluate our theories? Theorizing the future would require rethinking the set of demarcation criteria to differentiate speculation from scientific knowledge production and hence develop criteria for speculative rigor. Rather than criteria based on whether theories are subject to falsification by measuring them against empirical reality or criteria based on whether theories contribute to a stock of past knowledge, we could imagine new criteria that are linked to the ability of our theories to feed forward desirable change.

FROM POST-FACTUAL TO PRE-FACTUAL

We started this essay by asking whether and how we might study, conceptualize, and theorize that which does not (yet) exist. Of course, we remain far from having conclusively resolved this question. But we hope that this essay will open up the conversation about what a new future-oriented research agenda might look like, and it is our hope that our colleagues will join us so that we can together develop new ways to research (for) the future. It is clear that this must engage the community of management scholars collectively, because the implications of re-imagining what data is, how it is used, and how we theorize are far reaching. It would offer a complementary way of doing research in which imagination becomes data and where we see mind-before-matter. While we currently face the challenges of a so-called post-truth world, we may rigorously work on a pre-truth world: from post-factual to pre-factual.

Researching acts of imagination could also offer opportunities for scholars whose perspectives are currently under-represented in our community. Let's face it: Opportunities to study future technologies or access empirical data on real utopias are unevenly distributed. This puts many whose perspectives would be immensely valuable at a disadvantage. They may be more likely to have access to the imaginable and can thus speak and write about key global challenges and opportunities such as artificial intelligence, climate change, or inequality, as it affects them and their communities.

To conclude, we argue that we need to imagine alternative futures, which requires renewing our methodological toolkit and rethinking the purpose of theorizing in terms of performing desirable futures. Our academic profession is uniquely placed to do so because of our distinct ethos that is not driven by profit objectives but rather by scientific and societal norms. We thus envision that both a critical and normative stance will become more important. This requires a consciousness of alternatives and conscience in engaging with them. If we don't imagine the future, others like technology companies will. We need to think more about our role as an intellectual conscience that bridges head

and heart. Academia is a vocation, a profession to be professed. Otherwise, we will be outsmarted – only to study, explain, and theorize social realities that were imposed on us. To this end, we propose disciplined imagination of alternative, desirable futures as a form of avant-garde research that does not only examine reality-in-the-making but can also shape social reality through its performative potential. Imagine that.

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