

## Materiality at work: A note on desks

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### abstract

In the course of the material turn in social sciences, the material precondition or *fabricatedness* of practices increasingly comes into focus. In this article we explore what happens when applying some of the current notions of material power to the analysis of economic and business settings. We do so by focusing on one specific, omnipresent and taken-for-granted object: the table. Different manifestations of the table in the context of work, management and retail will be outlined and analysed with regard to the respective status of materiality.

### Introduction

Work is taking place in spaces and with the help of objects. This is the case no matter if we are confronted with a classical open plan office or with the workplaces of a neoliberal regime of labor mobility and flexibility where work has slipped into formerly work free zones such as trains, cafés or the home. Materiality is central to work and organization. This is why some workplaces turn into objects of conscious design efforts that are believed to support the achievement of certain business goals. The manipulation of space appears as an integral element of capturing the hearts and minds of employees. Reshaping their spaces of work is an organizational attempt to manufacture organizational culture and appropriate employee identities (Dale and Burrell, 2008). But it is not only the intentionally fabricated spaces and objects that affect the character of work and performance: it is also the apparently neutral setting, the unnoticed arrangement or the practical appliance going beyond being subject for discussion that interact with the working people:

Materiality communicates and shapes. It consists not only of physical structures but is part of the inter-subjective and subjective realm that makes up our social relations. And in turn, the physical world made social comes to constitute people through its very materiality. The spaces and places around us construct us as we construct them. (Dale and Burrell, 2008: 1)

Seen this way, materiality is socially produced and at the same time produces social relations. It is therefore important to understand the nature and effects of materiality, also for our understanding of the relation between freedom and work. However 'free' and self-governed a working environment presents itself, for example a Google Lab or an artist's studio, it is still manufactured space. Both, intentionally designed spaces and seemingly undesigned working contexts, affect the activities taking place.

According to Henri Lefebvre space is a complex social product which is based on a social production of meanings affecting perceptions and spatial practices. His focus is on the process and the political character of the production of space, which is also a means of control and therefore a means of domination and power (Lefebvre, 1991: 26). The production of space is a threefold determination: material production, the production of knowledge and the production of meaning. Space emerges in the interplay between all three (Goonewardena, 2008: 41). Lefebvre further punctuates that every society and every mode of production produces its own space. In modern neo-capitalism there is a double interaction between the social relations of production and reproduction:

Social space contains – and assigns (more or less) appropriate places to – (1) the social relations of reproduction, i.e. the bio-physiological relations between sexes and between age groups, along with the specific organization of the family, and (2) the relations of production, i.e. the division of labour and its organization in the form of hierarchical social functions. (Lefebvre, 1991: 31)

We follow the discrimination between the space of reproduction and production, but center on the relations of production so as to localize the material conditions of work. Concentrating on the otherwise often taken-for-granted materiality of work is central to our argument. In order to research it, we decided to focus on a specific object: the table. As more or less universal work devices, tables and desks are omnipresent in workplaces, organizations and business settings. They occur in form of sales counters (e.g. Fig. 6), reception desks, work benches, writing desks, bargaining and negotiating tables,<sup>1</sup> conference tables (e.g. Fig. 1, 2, 4, 5) and diverse variations of these, such as mobile office car desks (e.g. Fig. 8). We will sample different understandings and theories of materiality and apply them

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1 cf. Documentary *Nothing ventured* by experimental filmmaker, clipping available at <http://youtu.be/kOLdRSDWvRo> (as of 06/01/2012).

to different table scenarios. Our proceeding is structured by an enumeration that might seem rather arbitrary. The different sections are labelled: (a) tables belonging to philosophers and poets, (b) round tables, (c) rectangular tables, (d) tables to stand at, (e) mobile tables, and (f) no tables at all. Our enumeration is intended to remind of the rather exotic taxonomy of a Chinese dictionary entitled ‘The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge’ cited by writer and librarian Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>2</sup> According to the dictionary, animals can be divided into:

(a) those belonging to the Emperor, (b) those that are embalmed, (c) those that are tame, (d) pigs, (e) sirens, (f) imaginary animals, (g) wild dogs, (h) those included in this classification, (i) those that are crazy-acting, (j) those that are uncountable, (k) those painted with the finest brush made of camel hair, (l) miscellaneous, (m) those which have just broken a vase, and (n) those which, from a distance look like flies. (Borges, 1992: 115-116)

Borges uses the mind-boggling list to spell out to what extent every classification and ‘logical’ order of things and thoughts are always arbitrary and only provisional. By tentatively following this gesture we would like to point to the established conventions of how to research a certain subject. Referring to the title of the present issue “Free Work” we will look into different ideas and lines of analysis in an affirmingly contingent way. The selected material is neither delimited to specific disciplinary areas nor to methodologically established usages. We drew from market sociology, organizational behaviour, science studies, literary studies, cultural studies, architectural theory, media theory, management, art, photography and literature. The heterogeneous material was interwoven in a way that appeared appropriate for the advancement of comprehension. This approach allows for very different questions to be followed up and brought together in one paper while focusing on the object of the table.

#### *(a) Tables belonging to philosophers and poets*

A few philosophers, such as Platon and Edmund Husserl, studied the table, though not the table itself, but something deriving from its contemplation, such as the relation between thing and essence: ‘Using the example of the table, Platon elaborately expatiates on essentialism – without paying the least attention to the table or even the nature of the table.’ (Seitter, 2002: 72) The rather short history of knowledge about the table shows that putting an object as banal and quotidian as the table in the centre of a reputable scientific inquiry is beyond occidental paradigmatic order. At last an explicit ‘turn to physics’ (*ibid.*: 75) can be found in the writings of 20th century French poet Francis Ponge, namely in his works *Le parti pris des choses* (1995) and *La table* (1982). Towards the end of his

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2 The list is well known from the preface of Foucault’s *The order of things: An archeology of the human sciences* (1966).

career, Ponge starts to busy himself with the most accurate descriptions of common things framing this undertaking as follows:

I reflect today that, generally speaking, I write only for my own consolation (if I'm not commissioned to write) and that the greater the hopelessness, the more intense (necessarily so) the fixation upon the object (in linguistics the referent); (...). (Ponge, 1982: 11)<sup>3</sup>

This turn to objects allows him not only to cope with his despair, but also to address an object like the table directly and to explore it for its own sake. With Ponge it sounds like this:

Table, you who were (and still are) operating table, dissecting table (cf. The Anatomy Lesson), or a wheel upon which I break (if you like) the bones of words, how am I to break you down in turn? (I cannot break you down without at the same time calling on your support.) (*ibid.*: 57)<sup>4</sup>

Media theorist and media physicist<sup>5</sup> Walter Seitter follows Ponge in carefully studying the medial properties of the table starting from its materiality. What is a table? According to Seitter a table is first and foremost an elevated floor, a floor differentiation or a floor terrace (Seitter, 2002: 69) creating the eye-hand-zone appropriate for handling things. The table as a medium enables the presentation and realisation of things as well as information transmission, procession and registration, which altogether constitutes 'the radical power of the table' (*ibid.*: 77). He concludes by stating that fundamentally a table is not only an instrument of presentation, but additionally of traffic in the sense that an 'airspace' (*ibid.*: 79) arises from the firm and even surface. As a transport depot within events of traffic, the table retains things for a certain period of time until their removal (*ibid.*: 86). Its medial qualities hence lay in the translation between the vacuum and the firmness – a characteristic that, according to Seitter, the table shares with some other media, such as the chair and the house.

3 'Je réfléchis aujourd'hui que d'une façon générale j'écris pour ma consolation (si je n'écris par sur commande) et que, plus le désespoir est grand, plus la fixation sur l'objet (on le nomme en linguistique le référent) est intense (nécessairement intense); (...)' (13 August, 1968).

4 'Table, qui fut (et reste) la table d'opération, de dissection (cf. la leçon d'anatomie), ou (si l'on veut) la roue sur laquelle je mis les mots à la question. Comment t'y mettre toi-même? (je ne peux t'y mettre toi-même sans que tu viennes encore à mon appui.)' (3 October, 1973).

5 In the monography *Physik der Medien*, Walter Seitter extensively and painstakingly describes the strictly material properties of particular artefacts/media such as the street, the house, paper, air, vehicles, the hand and so forth adopting a point of view 'that is neither fascinated nor illusioned by the so called New Media' (Seitter, 2002: 86).

*(b) Round tables*

In business contexts, round tables can most likely be found in meeting rooms, conference rooms or boardrooms. The works *The table of power* (1993-1995) and *Banks* (1995-1996) by conceptual artist Jacqueline Hassink assemble photographs of Europe's forty largest multinational corporations' boardrooms often displaying round tables (cf. Fig. 1 & 2).



Figure 1: Round table (Société Générale).<sup>6</sup>

Hassink's work directs the attention to the materiality of the executive board. Her perspective allows to conceptualize its actions without the taken for granted actors, instead she focuses on the discursively neglected non-human actors thereby suggesting that those noted as things<sup>7</sup> take part in the action. In our reading of *The table of power* and *Banks* they refer to the idea that the executive board's activity can be described as originating not only from its members but from an assemblage of human and non-human actors, a so called actor-network consisting of the very board members, tables, board members' deputies, chairs, consultants, carpets, secretaries, microphones, service staff, coffee pots and many more. The fact that this listing is so difficult and staccato-like to read gives

6 Photographs in *Banks* (1995-1996) by Jaqueline Hassink, in Lachmayer and Louis (1998).

7 The concept of non-human actors strongly gains in scientific popularity commensurate with the widespread reading of different texts by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and other scholars summarized under the label actor-network-theory (ANT).

further evidence to Bruno Latour's hypothesis that the separation between humans and things is central to the modern view of the world. The modern, strictly disaggregating view hides the factual existence of hybrids: composite beings between nature and culture, thing and human (Latour, 2008: 19). According to Latour 'we have never been modern', meaning that the separation between humans and things has at no time been fulfilled. Instead the fundamental hybridity of human existence and action was discursively concealed, just like the notion of the executive board as an assemblage of human and non-human actors.



Figure 2: Round table (Dresdner Bank)-<sup>8</sup>

But the conference tables not only testify for the material condition and the hybrid character of the executives board's activity, they also draw attention to the fact that they are round tables. In his article titled *Round tables and angular tables*, literary scholar Nils Werber points to the not accidentally so called round table as a format of agreeing on something and resolving or avoiding conflict. Werber outlines a long planned and haggled over meeting between the leaders of the Irish catholic party Sinn Féin and the British protestant Democratic Unionist Party in March 2007. One of the central questions while organising the meeting concerned the seating: were they to be seated opposite or next to each other? Neither seemed appropriate respectively realisable. In the end, the two politicians

<sup>8</sup> Photographs in *Banks* (1995-1996) by Jaqueline Hassink, in Lachmayer and Louis (1998).

were seated adjacent to each other around the angle of a diamond-shaped, hence poly-angular table. Nevertheless, news coverage unanimously labelled the encounter as ‘round table’ celebrating the miraculous rapprochement. This word choice points to a victory for the organisers and middlemen of the meeting, namely Peter Hain of the British ministry of Northern Ireland (Werber, 2009: 114). At a round table, agreement is presupposed to such an extent that the table itself turns into its signifier. The round table appears to already anticipate the outcome of the interlocution held and can hence be seen as a rhetorical form or – following Bruno Latour – as a non-human actor, as something actively constraining the amount of possibilities of what is happening on a table. It advances comprehension not only because it is the intended result, but also through its materiality that seems to constitute comprehension already in itself: it leads to the situation that a group of people is gathered around a table, there is no head and no end, every member appears equal and equally important in creating a certain integrity (*ibid.*: 121). Werber therefore considers the round table to be ‘a cultural technique of producing consent’ (115).

(c) *Rectangular tables*

In *Space is the machine*, architectural theorist Bill Hillier notes, that behaviour at a table appears to us as a spatio-temporal event. But according to Hillier, it is given order and purpose by an ‘unconscious configurationality’ (2007: 28). This configurationality prevails in all areas ‘where we use rule systems to behave in ways which are recognizable as social’ (*ibid.*). For Hillier it is a form of social knowledge which creates order in everyday life. This knowledge is about habits of doing and there is no need for them to be brought to conscious attention. In this sense certain table shapes like other spatial structures shape human behaviour. How people interact on a round table differs significantly from the behaviour patterns emerging at a rectangular or square table. According to Hillier shapes can be represented as a regularly constructed mesh of cellular elements or tessellation (*ibid.*: 80). This conceptualization allows measuring the grade of integration of each table shape.

The starting point is to create a circular tessellation of small square cells. It is then possible to calculate the mean depth of each cell from all others. After that the results are expressed in a distribution of dot densities for the square elements. The higher densities (darker colour) stand for greater integration, the lower densities (lighter colour) stand for less integration. Compared to a circular shape, a square form is less integrated. ‘It has greater average universal distances per tessellation element’ (*ibid.*: 81). The overall form of a rectangular table is even less integrated.

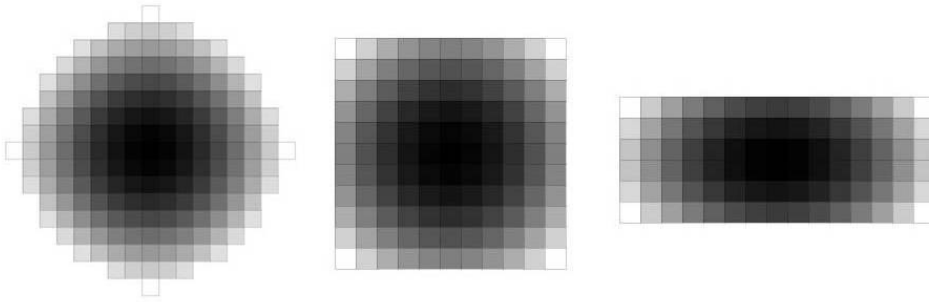


Figure 3: Table shapes.<sup>9</sup>

Hillier notes that ‘the correspondence between these structures of “shape” and the ways in which shape is exploited for social purposes is intriguing’ (*ibid.*). In cases where interactive status is more critical, table shapes follow the pattern of integration. In cases where symbolic status is more critical, table shapes also follow the pattern of integration though with opposite tendencies (*ibid.*). He illustrates this as follows:

For example, on square dining tables the centre side is more advantageous than corner locations, because it is a more integrated location. Similarly, the English prime minister sits in the centre of the long side of a broad rectangular table, maximizing this advantage in integration. (*ibid.*)

Hillier notes that the opposite is the case where symbolic status is more important: ‘Where status rather than interaction is the issue, caricature dukes and duchesses sit at opposite ends of a long table, maximizing proxemic segregation but also surveillance’ (*ibid.*). How do spatial configurations like table shapes symbolize or influence collective behaviour in different economic environments? Looking at the meeting tables of the board of directors of Nestlé (Switzerland) or the meeting table of the Executive board of Barclay’s Bank (England) suggests symbolic status to be more important than interaction. Hence table



Figure 4: Rectangular table (Nestlé Switzerland).<sup>10</sup>

9 Computer generated graphic by Sven Schneider (Informatics in Architecture, Bauhaus University Weimar), inspired by Hillier, B. (2007: 80-1).



shapes could be analysed as aspects of corporate culture.

However the pictures demonstrate that tables are not only representing the core of corporate culture but also the centres of economic power. Tables are the center of globally operating corporations where a small number of people are making decisions which affect us all. To make this table visible is tantamount to making economic power visible. Since 2008 and during the ‘Great Recession’ the world’s economy has changed sweeping away some of the heretofore largest companies like Lehman Brothers. In the USA and Europe a large amount of corporations had disappeared. Others face decreasing revenues and react with reducing or reorganising their employees. But is this economic and also cultural change related to boardroom design? Certainly space and materiality cannot only be seen as tools for inducing cultural change or as crucial parameters in changing organizations. Space may also be seen as an indicator for a changing society producing its space in a complex interplay between materiality, knowledge and meaning.



Figure 5: Rectangular table (Barclay's Bank).<sup>10</sup>

*(d) Tables to stand at*

Tables to stand at can be found in form of work benches, reception desks and sales counters. The stand-up table appears as intermediary in retail-costumer

<sup>10</sup> Photographs in *The table of power* (1993-1995) by Jaqueline Hassink, published at IVASFOT [<http://www.ivasfot.com/?p=6224>].

interaction (cf. Fig. 6). In this aspect it differs from the other table manifestations assembled in this paper that are solely intervening on the production side of business.

The counter can be cited as the basic example of a 'market device' (Callon et al., 2007). The term refers to the notion that market interaction is never and has never been independent of certain vehicles or expedients that enable and compose interaction thereby fulfilling a constitutive role in the formation of markets. It is about a perspective that focuses on 'the role of objects, technologies and other artefacts' (Cochoy, 2007: 109) in framing and generating transactions. In his contribution titled *A sociology of market-things: on tending the garden of choices in mass retailing*, market sociologist Franck Cochoy argues that the 'laissez-faire'-principle of liberal markets does not exist out of itself but has to be fabricated. The setting up of commercial transactions, the art and science of 'faire laissez-faire' (115) relates to a sort of pragmatic management skill distinct to the professions of shop designers or aisle managers (cf. Barrey, Cochoy, Dubuisson-Quellier, 2000). Sales counters are one of their central fields of action and attest to the ineluctable material quality of market operations.

Following again Seitter, who evokes the 'desire for the standing desk' (Seitter, 2002: 75) in philosophers' circles, the high desk ('middle high plateau' *ibid.*: 77), just like any other desk, presents a bearing that withstands the action of engraving. But aside of this, a sales counter proves to dispose of further crucial qualities. Drawing from his spatial theoretical study of supermarket objects, Cochoy makes the case that consumer preferences do not antedate the act of shopping, but that they are generated during the encounter with goods: '(...) we learn that preferences, far from preceding the act of purchase, are largely constructed along the immediate interaction with products' (2007: 119). Applying this perspective to the sales counter, it appears to



Figure 6: Sales counter.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Photograph published in E. Mass (1987) *Tische: Deutschland 1900 - 1945*. Nördlingen: Greno Verlag.

not only represent the commercial offers, but also to determine the frame within which possible consumer choices and subsequent transactions will take place. Preferences can only be generated alongside the offer displayed on the table. More generally speaking, access to and participation in a certain market is materially governed (cf. accessing the market of E-bay demanding a computer, internet connection, software, registration). It is an object like the sales counter in its ability to assemble retailers, products and customers that determines or even constitutes a market by acting as an agent between offer and demand. Without an artefact like the sales counter neither offer nor demand are able to unfold. They can hence be understood as a phenomenon of translation (Latour, 2006) and not as existing beyond any material configuration.

*(e) Mobile tables*

Leon Trotsky, the people's commissar for the military of the Soviet Union, can be considered as ranging among the today so widely discussed workers of mobility and flexibility. From about 1918 until 1922 he organised the constitution of the Red Army from a train. Consequently, life and work on the train demands a whole chapter of his autobiography:

During the most strenuous years of the revolution, my own personal life was bound up inseparably with the life of that train. There I received those who brought reports, held conferences with local military and civil authorities, studied telegraphic dispatches, dictated orders and articles [...]. In my spare time I dictated my book against Kautsky, and various other works. In those years I accustomed myself, seemingly forever, to writing and thinking to the accompaniment of Pullman wheels and springs. (Trotsky, 1930: chapter XXXIV)

In a rather similar way, management Guru Charles Handy gives an account of the rampant discourse of work being liberated from the constraints of space and time:

People can work from the place and at the point in time, that makes most sense to them. They can be spread around the globe or start their labour hours at any time of the day, they can work at home, on the plane or on the train (Handy, 1998: 286).

Handy envisions the office spaces of the future, one of their main characteristic being the lack of 'staticness' and sense of place. Describing the London based advertising agency St. Luke's, Handy gives an example of how an organisation can incorporate and adapt to the new logic: At St. Luke's employees do not dispose of proper personal tables but install themselves at collective tables every morning anew (non-territorial office). These tables are organised in different project rooms each devoted to a specific client. Personal working materials such as currently dealt with documents or files are collected in the so called 5:30 p.m.-

*boxes*: at closing hour they are stored backstage in order to be picked up again the next day. They are designed to prevent employees from ‘sitting’ themselves to an informally acknowledged personal worktable (*ibid.*: 285).

At a closer and media theoretically informed look it becomes clear that within a new order of mobility and apparent placelessness, space is not substantially disposable but it changes in character and in its medial properties. To an increasing extent, the important exchange and collaboration between people does not occur in fixed offices and commonly bent over the table anymore, but is generated through other means (e.g. of telecommunication). Investments in stationary offices might be substituted by investments in notebooks, collaborative software, smartphones, common and meeting rooms or stopovers at conference hotels. Following Handy, the proper office (desk) ‘will vanish within the next century, even though many will grieve for it’ (*ibid.*: 286). Instead the computer desktop, a digital and mobile desk, assumes the capacities of a stationary office: assembling, storing and processing data. Cultural theorist Hartmut Böhme conceptualises the office as a relay of streams of information where materiality is relevant only insofar as it serves as carrier medium of sign processes (1998: 97). The phenomena of the world are turned into office suitable procedures and thereby adapt a second, two-dimensional and emblematic existence within documents, files or data sheets. The computer imitates the office architecture of information processing and world phenomena transmission to the point that it graphically and semantically features a desktop, files, registers, post-its and so forth. The phenomena of the world take on a second existence in discrete values. It is manifest, a notebook replaces an office – placed on the lap it even makes an analog chair-table-combination superfluous by forming that constellation in itself (Seitter, 2002: 88).

However, according to Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell, who relate materiality at work to questions of identity and power, the imaginary transformation of the workplace is probably more significant than its material one:

The traditional associations and construction of “work” are being disassembled, to be replaced with symbols and resonances from other social arenas: those of the community (village pumps, neighbourhoods, townscapes), the domestic (an imagery of the family), leisure (fun, art, workplace gyms) and consumption (streets,



Figure 7: Lap-top-office.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Computer modified image by Cornelius K. Donat.

employee shareholding). (Dale and Burrell, 2008: 116)

Reshaping the imagery and materiality of workplaces is dedicated to bring pleasure and self-fulfilment, that employees are supposed to experience outside their working life, into the realm of management control. Management discourses of the 80s and 90s underline that pleasure could be managed to maximize business returns. For instance they ask: 'How is it that you have the most enthusiastic, most committed, most talented group of employees – except for the eight hours a day they work for you?' (*ibid*: 117) Tom Peters was one among many engaged in describing how the pleasurable parts of capitalism could be integrated in the workplace in order to support people's positive feelings and shape their imagination of work (cf. Dale and Burrell, 2008). Today, organizations concentrate on injecting fun into workplaces. Therefore workplace design has become big business and architecture or design consultancies (e.g. DEGW or NTW) emerge as organizational change appointees for reconstructing or even constructing buildings intended to be agents of organizational culture. Organizations like Google, Microsoft or the BBC invest a lot of money in designing workspace aimed at capturing the hearts and minds of employees as well as shaping an imagery of the organizational identity. Considering capitalism as being about gaining the highest possible return for its investment in people and maximizing the extraction of surplus value, the changing notion of workplace can be seen as highly effective. Following Dale and Burrell, the material and the imaginary disappearances of the workplace are closely linked. In this sense, identity construction can be taken with the employees through



Figure 8: Mobile office car desk.<sup>13</sup>

whatever spaces in which they are working, also into spaces that are usually not defined as working places: 'The confluence of work and identity was not solely to remain in the workplace, but was to extend workplace out into the rest of the individual's life.' (*ibid*: 117) The extension of the workplace to other arenas like the car is only one remarkable example for this (Fig. 11).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Photograph Roadmaster Car Desk [<http://www.comfortchannel.com/prod.itml/icOid/17459>].

(f) *No tables at all*

One of the things most certainly mentioned when referring to the legendary RAND Corporation, the ‘prototypical think tank’ (Brandstetter, Pias, Vehlken, 2010: 11) set up in 1946 by the U.S. Air Force, is the story about its employees gathering in groups and sitting or lying on the floor while reasoning and discussing about some scientific problems. This picture was conveyed through different media coverage, one of them being Leonard McCombe’s pictorial essay titled *Valuable batch of brains: An odd little company called RAND plays big role in U.S. defense* published in LIFE magazine in May 1959.<sup>14</sup> Three of the featured pictures can be highlighted with regard to the illustrated neglect of the table as well as the complete absence of a table.



Figure 9: Neglected table (RAND Corporation).<sup>15</sup>

The first (Fig. 9) shows a group of four men and a woman: two of them placed on chairs, two on the floor, the women sitting on the steps of a staircase. The

<sup>14</sup> At that time LIFE ranged among the U.S.-magazines with the highest coverage reaching its peak in 1970 with more than 8 million subscribers and an estimated pass-along rate of four to five people per copy (cf. Doss, 2001:1).

<sup>15</sup> Photographs by Leonard McCombe, in L. McCombe (1959) ‘Valuable batch of brains: An odd little company called RAND plays big role in U.S. defense’, *LIFE magazine*, 11 May.

table appearing in this picture palpably plays a marginal role and reminds of the manifold descriptions Francis Ponge gives of his way of relating to the table: 'If I sit at a table, then I do so next to it, [...], left elbow sometimes resting on the table and calves and feet up, writing tablet on my lap' (1967: 3).<sup>16</sup>

The second picture (Fig. 10) shows a group of people gathered on the floor, arranged in a circle in a particularly furnished and lowly lit up room (it is the home of Albert Wohlstetter, one of the central figures at RAND). The third picture (Fig. 11) presents Albert Wohlstetter stretched out on an armchair, his feet up on a desk. A globe in the background doubles the shape of his head. The question is, what do the tables do in their absent or neglected role?

The emergence of the RAND Corporation is commensurate with the possibility of a nuclear war and the need to think about the unthinkable (Kahn, 1962). In the face of the existence and deployment of nuclear weapons (after Hiroshima and Nagasaki the mere existence, the non-deployment already is the deployment), established military knowledge appeared more and more inappropriate or even useless (Smith, 1966: 20-21). The gap of incompetence was filled by a group of specialists recruited from different disciplines (Brandstetter, Pias, Vehlken, 2010: 39). This called for practices apt to efficiently coordinate interdisciplinary exchange and the development



Figure 10: Absent table (RAND Corporation), spiritualistic séance?<sup>15</sup>

of hypothetical solutions to widely hypothetical problem scenarios – 'thought-style of virtuality', (*ibid.*: 40). What were those practices? According to John D.

<sup>16</sup> 'Si je me mets à table, c'est plutôt assis à côté d'elle [...], le coude gauche alors parfois appuyé sur la table et les mollets et les pieds par dessus, mon écritoire sur les genoux' (21-23 Nov., 1967).



Williams, who exercised heavy influence on the organisation in its early years (Abella, 2008: 21), the idea was to generate constant informal and unplanned get-togethers. This state was to be reached through the architectural configuration of the RAND building in Santa Monica optimising spatial motion and thereby generating ‘controlled collision of clever heads’ (Brandstetter, Pias, Vehlken, 2010: 46). The plan worked out: In different reports there is mention of the apparent atmosphere of casualness, playfulness, experimentation, concentration and devotion signified through open office doors, endless group discussions, meetings on the floor, a relaxed dress code, overly scribbled black boards, tables surcharged with papers and spreadsheets, and completely immersed scientists (*ibid.*: 39). All of this can be considered as a staging of the current narration of what it looks like to be engaged in outstanding and innovative out-of-the-box thinking ready to be applied to contemporary challenges. The absence or neglect of tables appears as an integral part in this staging by connoting ideas like being liberated from middle-class conventions and hence able to think beyond established borders.

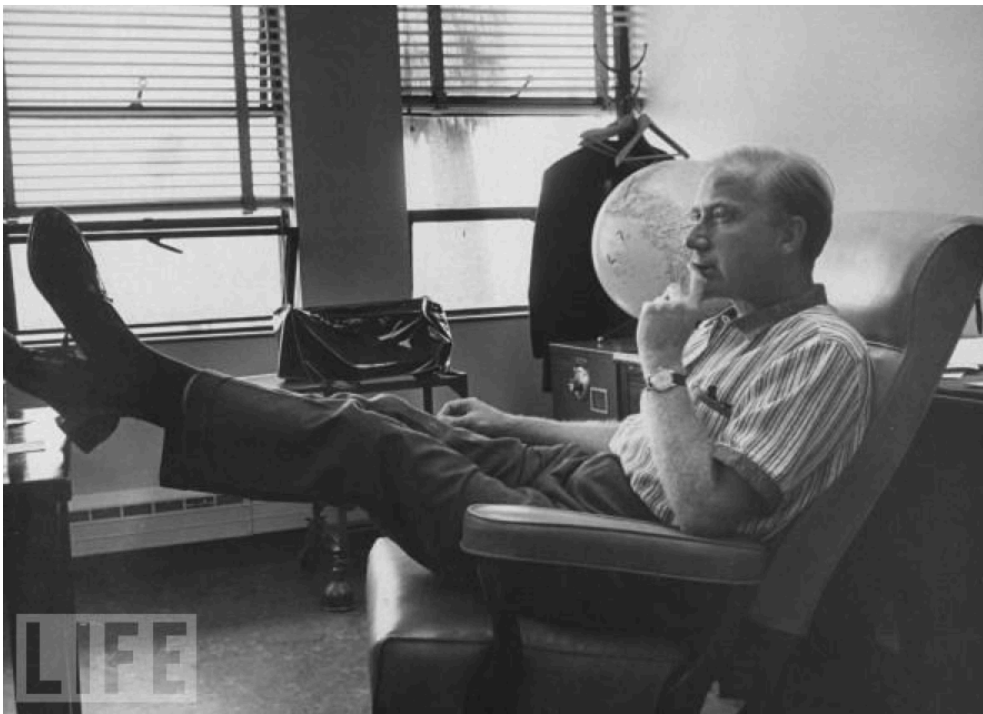


Figure 11: RAND employee A. Wohlstetter dismisses the table.<sup>15</sup>

This is a rather innocent, maybe even euphemistic and certainly apolitical assessment of the think tank. It omits the frequent critique on RAND and its influences on policy decisions, sometimes labelled as ‘exaggerated’ conspiracy theories imputing a ‘sinister behind-the-scene role’ (Smith, 1966: 26-27). One of



these critiques presents an article by Chalmers Johnson who himself was a consultant at RAND in the 1960s. He describes the RAND Corporation as a 'quintessential member of the American establishment' with the central objective to support American imperialism and militarism. (Johnson, 2008) In doing so RAND-analysis appear to comprise and effuse essentially anti-democratic conceptions. Johnson refers to RAND's 1960s research conclusions on the then so called Third World as an example. They state that the United States should support military rule in underdeveloped countries so as to ensure collaboration with military officers. Chalmers considers these research reports to entail the establishment of U.S.-backed military dictatorships in East Asia during the 1960s and 1970s in countries such as South Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia (*ibid.*). But it is not only this specific consultancy that makes RAND appear as a propagator of hegemonic and anti-democratic reasoning. According to Alex Abella, the highly prominent idea of man comprised in rational choice theory can be traced back to RAND where it was contrived in 1951. Through RAND's long-term advisory role, the conception explaining all human behaviour in terms of pure self-interest and reducing rationality to wanting more rather than less of a good, could gain in implicitness in Western policymaking and eventually begin to resonate in all kinds of societal areas, from education to relationships.

Curiously, for Hannah Arendt the absence of a table placed in the middle of a group of people metaphorically signifies self-interested individuals being completely unrelated to each other. With regard to contemporary mass society she says:

What makes mass society so difficult to bear is [...] the fact that the world between them [the people] has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible. (Arendt, 1958: 52-53)

In contrast, living together in society in a way that people are related to each other implies the common custody over a public realm, literally 'that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it' (*ibid.*: 52).

## Tabula rasa

In this article we deliberately restricted our regard to a specific object, the table, and tried to present tables as part of a material world that is far from being

passive. Rather material artefacts like the table intervene in human interaction by structuring activities, promoting certain activities and restraining others. Our objective was to put to the test some analyses possibly deriving from solely looking at the object, here the table, in this knowingly imbalanced thing-perspective. We firstly looked at the material power and medial properties of the table followed by examinations of different manifestations of the table in business and work settings. Our approach not only allowed to focus, examine and bring together different table scenarios, but also to hint at certain structures and relations. We showed how table shapes create different degrees of integration, consequently how round tables can be viewed as a technique of producing consent while the unequally distributed degree of integration at rectangular tables renders them appropriate for the exposition of difference in status. Following Franck Cochoy's explanations on 'market-things', we made the case that offer and demand follow up on the preposition of a table that assembles retailers, products and consumers and by doing so constitutes a market through its fabrication ('faire laissez-faire'). Concerning mobile tables it can be stated that the working space has changed its medial properties and its character. The digital desktop of the laptop has in part made the chair-table-combination superfluous by forming that constellation in itself. In this way the ubiquitous imperative of mobility and flexibility is linked to the materiality of work. It is important to note that in flexible work spaces power is still prevalent also if not always visible. In this way the connection between the material and the imaginary flexibilization of work are illuminating. Flexibilization is about the extension of the workplace into the whole life of the individual rather than freeing the individual from prescribed routines. Lastly, we looked at possible consequences of the absence or the overt neglect of tables as central pieces of furniture using the example of the RAND Corporation. The flaunted 'tablelessness' can be considered as a staging of unconventionality. Does it go too far to relate absent and neglected tables to hegemonic and anti-democratic thinking? From an epistemological perspective this is worth discussing more in depth.

With regard to theoretical underpinnings there are also interesting prospects for further researching materiality in the spheres of production, consumption and reproduction. The already mentioned writings of Henri Lefebvre (*La Production de l'espace*, 1974) for instance could add some fecund further points concerning space as a social product that affects social practices and relations. Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell (2008) as well as Bill Hillier (2007) draw largely on Lefebvre. It is also possible to turn to earlier authors, such as Friedrich Nietzsche (e.g. *On the genealogy of morals*) who conceived human beings as technical beings. From this perspective, 'Menschwerdung' would have been impossible without cultural techniques related to specific artefacts. In terms of methodology, there is a need to further review and probe possible forms of researching objects, materiality and

human-object-interaction in an adequate and perceptive manner. In this context, the choice of objects to research and whereupon to structure an inquiry seems to be of importance. What are promising, revealing and productive objects to focus on? What are the criteria? For instance, we are actually thinking about looking at the role of voice amplifiers like megaphones and telephones in the context of management. How do the changing modes of communication affect the organisation of production, the character of work and of the business itself?

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