Many thanks to Ruy Blanes and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen for their response to my critique (Bråten 2022a) of their special section on ‘Utopian Confluences’ (especially, Blanes and Bertelsen 2021; Bertelsen 2021), and to Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale for publishing the exchange. The theoretical questions that arise from our diverging stances are, hopefully, of general interest. While I take Blanes and Bertelsen (hereafter B&B) to argue an epistemologically all-inclusive irrealism, I favour an ontologically discerning realism. It is tempting to pursue the many theoretical entailments of this contrast further, but let me in this final reply comment on the character of the exchange itself: the kind of intellectual discourse that our diverging positions seem to foster. I believe B&B’s response is illustrative of a ‘post-critical’ approach that recasts principles of scholarly debate in problematic ways. Addressing this issue allows me also to clarify a perplexity in their response: How could I possibly read their contributions as ‘irrealist’ and instances of a ‘migration out of academia’?

My point of departure is that B&B hardly engage substantively with my core contentions. To reiterate, I argued that they fail in their overall ambition to render utopias ‘this-worldly’. This is so because they refuse to specify the relation between utopian mobilisations and their socio-material contexts. Disregarding the content of this mutuality, the utopian unavoidably drifts back into ‘other-worldly’ domains of potentiality (rather than actuality) and imagination (rather than constitutive praxis). Moreover, I intimated that this paradox is a necessary entailment of the theoretical ground position that B&B assume.

There is a lot to learn from their evasions. Overall, they counter my contentions through a cunning displacement of discourse. While I am concerned with analytical questions, B&B reframe my contentions as matters of power, insinuating that my critique is expressive of imperialism, colonialism, domination and epistemological violence. In this reply, I resist engaging these intimations in order to keep eyes on the critical theoretical issues that B&B’s shift conceals. I am concerned with the possibly devastating effects on intellectual discourse of their denouncement of analysis.

In order to corroborate their discursive dislodgement, B&B use the greater part of the response to elaborate on their ground position. They offer empirical detail and references to African ethnography to counter allegations about irrealism and they cite, mainly postcolonial,¹ theory to undergird their core epistemic claim: that ‘truth’ is multiple. The first tactic misses the mark entirely; I emphasised that B&B are eminent
ethnographers. What I look for are attempts at analyses – explicit reasoning regarding the roles that utopian mobilisations play. For instance, in Bertelsen’s Maputo case, my question was how and why the youth teams he studies are ontologically constitutive (or not) with respect to the urban transformations (gentrification, resilience governance, etc.) that impinge on them. How do team discourses and practices – and utopian mobilisations more generally – affect the dynamics of, for example, poverty production, capitalist exploitation and state violence? If they matter-of-factly do not, is it then reasonable to accord them a profoundly generative power, which B&B explicitly do? No amassment of empirical facts, however detailed, can compensate for this retraction from analysis, and this is one sense in which B&B’s approach comes through as irrealist. It willingly disregards aspects of ontological constitution.

Moreover, this circumvention is not incidental; it is a necessary entailment of their embrace of epistemological multiplicity. If, as a matter of principle, all ‘truths’ are accorded the same analytical status, we give up on any notion of external reality from which to assess social phenomena (see Bråten 2022b, 2022c). We allow no non-relative outside against which utopian mobilisations can be framed, hence there are no ‘how and why’ questions to be asked. Here we arrive at the second manifestation of B&B’s irrealism. Their restrictive definition of utopia as ‘the movement from transformative will into an instance of mobilisation’ (2022: 142) evinces the kind of self-enclosing conceptualisation that this stance fosters. In the optic of epistemic multiplicity, phenomena cannot but turn in on themselves, demanding to be treated as singularities. Our discussion of utopias, then, is halted where the interesting questions arise: What kind of reality do transitions from will into mobilisations actually instigate? Are they ontologically constitutive beyond their own instantiations?

The point is that, in this perspective, analyses of real-life impacts and counter-impacts must necessarily give way to irrealist ruminations over potentiality – an anthropology, not of constraints, affordances and situated forging, but of entirely non-contingent ‘possibility, opportunity and inclusion’, as B&B put it (2022: 142). Our interest is deflected from what teams actually accomplish in terms of impact, to what their immanent qualities might illuminate about future possibilities were they to be ontologically constitutive. Don Kalb (2018) notes how such reluctance to engage intellectually with socio-material verities and their formative powers pervades current anthropology. As I see it, no resort to supportive theoretical literature, however esteemed, can compensate for this retreat into the subjunctive.

Moreover, given their orientation, it is quite logical that B&B counter my critique of metaphoric prose by multiplying metaphors. Their response circles around ‘cracks’ – an idiom they use to capture so diverse ontological domains as the whereabouts of Maputo teams and dissonances within anthropological thinking. They also liken ‘privileged’ reasoning (and I am a culprit) to the foam that police use to cover up things during riots (2022: 143), as if these, too, were processes of the same order. Such free-wheeling transportation of terms across ontologically disparate contexts is, exactly, what we mean by metaphorisation, and here is a third reason why B&B’s approach can justifiably be called irrealist. It substitutes analyses of ontological dynamics with the exploration of formal similarities across social realms. As Ståle Knudsen
(2014) has noted, once in operation, such semiotic transgressing also, easily, swallows the larger socio-material contexts that I keep pointing to. Lacking a substantive specification of effects and counter-effects at different ontological scales, capitalism, domination, ecological change and other ontologically efficacious dynamics become metaphoric, too. This proliferation of the poetical is evident when B&B finally touch on my substantive critique: urban transformations are now couched as ‘envelopes’ (2022: 145) of utopian mobilisations, while, as noted, in the opposite direction, teams manifest or engender ‘cracks’ in systems. Beyond that, they grant, teams are ‘numerically marginal and without necessarily any long-lasting temporal duration as a formation’ (2022: 143). One might wonder, then, whether the prime constitutive effect of teams is, actually, the poetics that they spur in the anthropological writer.

Let me finally return to B&B’s overall displacement of discourse, which seals their retraction into irrealism. The reply reveals that instead of engaging with critique, they venture to deconstruct the exercise of critique itself – as when they dismiss the ‘claims to singular universality’ (2022: 145) that, allegedly, drive my contentions. My arguments are, they intimate, instances of the hegemonic thinking that the multiple truth metaphysics seeks to undercut. I will only note that, when sober calls for specification, analysis and logical consistency can be dismissed so programmatically and with such ease, one senses the pervasiveness of B&B’s deconstruction – and this is my main point. We realise how the tactic of retraction may take on a life of its own, granting the post-critical anthropologist a means to undercut any proposition that may be rendered ‘universalist’. For one, as B&B put it assertively, we cannot rely on scientific knowledge since ‘[s]cientific truths are, of course, only contextually relevant and valid’ (2022: 141; my emphasis). There is no space here to challenge this thoroughly relativist ontology, nor to trace its wide-ranging effects on academic discourse, but it is worth pondering what is left to discuss across specifics and singularities when ‘universalist’ principles are dismissed wholesale in this manner.

In sum, B&B’s reply evinces a quadruple retraction into irrealism. They (i) disregard aspects of ontological constitution, (ii) reorient thinking from verities to potенtialities, (iii) replace analyses of formative socio-material forces with a poetics spurred by form similarities and (iv) seem to embrace a totalising principle – the rejection of ‘universalist thinking’ – that, ultimately, guards against critique as such. I maintain that there are good reasons to ask whether the kind of anthropology that B&B represent is about to propel itself ‘out of academia’, that is, violate principles of meaningful scholarly discourse.

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Notes

1. Since, arguably, the subversive thrust of B&B’s position fosters a refusal to be categorised, they might object to this label – indeed, to any attempt at labelling.

References