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DISCUSSION

Design is … corrupting

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> How do you know if grandma actually *needs* a hearing aid?

A few years ago, one of us sat as a political representative in a cross-party inquiry on the governance of publicly funded welfare systems. Established in response to a growing backlash against New Public Management (NPM) in Swedish welfare provision, the inquiry – organised through the Swedish Association for Local Authorities and Regions – sought to create cross-political consensus on managing the country's increasingly privatised and liberalised welfare system. The big idea promoted by the Association was service design-based solutions. They are successful in cross-party settings because they transcend the left-right divide on whether to roll back privatization. Moreover, it is easy to see the managerial benefits of deploying designerly empathy to distinguish between true user needs and formal citizen rights.

Hence the rhetorical question about the elderly lady and the hearing aid: designers lead a participatory process under the noble flag of empathy while, behind grandma's back, negotiating away her political right to a hearing aid. Without understanding the real forces of power in any given context and the corrupting tendencies in social relations, the high-minded ideals of design ended up stabbing grandma in the back.

This anecdote suggests that while empathy is a virtue, it may equally produce corrupting effects. Indeed, it is rare that the outcomes of designerly intentions live up to lofty promises. This holds for service design in government, but also co-design practices: participants end up betrayed and disillusioned, while the designers run off with their post-its and glossy photos for new funding opportunities.

In design, it is commonly held that it is a virtue to speak the language of possibilities and to ask speculative 'what if?' questions. The greats of our

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discipline posit that a designer is someone who works towards 'a desired, foreseeable end' (Papanek 1971, 3), someone whose job it is to change 'existing situations into preferred ones' (Simon 1996, 111). These definitions tend to be translated into a design practice that privileges creative conjectures about ideal end states. Conversely, designers are rarely encouraged to think creatively about how a recalcitrant social world may scupper their grand designs. The term 'change' in the design vocabulary translates to good vibes. Implying anything else would seem like a Judas kiss to the spirit of design. In the language of political theory, one may state that the dominant perspective on design is more idealist than realist.

We argue that the contemporary debate on design could do with a healthy dose of political realism. Still, with this quest, is it even possible to imagine a design practice that is more realist than idealist? For Pelle Ehn, this is the key wager of our recent book (von Busch and Palmås 2023): 'Machiavelli for democratic designers! A *contradicto in adjecto*?'

Realist design is not a contradiction in terms and does not preclude a commitment to the democratic potential of participatory design. Put bluntly; our response reiterates a key insight from Machiavelli. As Bruno Latour noted in an early text, Machiavelli's two main works – the defense of democracy of *Discourses on Livy* and the cynical analysis of power in *The Prince* – are 'one and the same' (Latour 1988, 20). When read together, they suggest that democratic ideals cannot be realised without a bleak outlook on 'the harsh realities of power'.

We are not the first design scholars to interrogate these harsh realities via realist political thought. For instance, Ehn's work on agonistic design (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012), as well as the work of Carl DiSalvo (2012), is influenced by Chantal Mouffe, a 'leading arch-realist' (Galston 2010, 396). Nor are we the first to bring Machiavelli to bear on design theory and practice: The founding editor of this journal, Rachel Cooper, has mobilised the Machiavellian notion of *virtù* in the context of innovation and design management (Cooper et al. 2003).

The concept of *virtù* is particularly useful as an entry point to the specifics of our argument. *The Prince* can be read as Machiavelli's satire on the princely virtues his contemporaries celebrated. For Machiavelli, these virtues – such as clemency and generosity – were ill-suited for a social world ravaged by betrayal, decay, and deception. *Virtù* is the alternative mode of conduct that Machiavelli proposes as a more sober and realistic corrective to those princely virtues. The design field similarly needs a corrective, as its perceived virtues blind it. When working with 'the social', designers must recognise that people are unlike any other material. They seldom act along the virtuous routes of the designer's plan. Participation is a social conflict simmering under polite exchanges of win-win scenarios and post-it notes. Its

outcomes would later be ignored if it wasn't for a handful of uncited papers. Again, the lofty ideals of democratic design cannot be realised without recognising the harsh realities of power.

In engaging in participatory processes, social actors, more often than not, end up having to betray their original interests. This is not a reason for giving up on co-design – but it must start from a recognition that it cannot be extricated from the political games of the social world. **Participation is not a win-win game; it is a conflict**.

While contemporary design and tech cultures celebrate the 'disruptive', designers must recognise that the changes they set in motion may corrupt social arrangements. Equally, they should be cognizant of the fact that their designs are themselves corruptible (that is, subject to decay). Therefore, design should be wedded to the Machiavellian imperative to 'maintain the state' of things – because change does not always change for the better. **Innovation and change are not an end in themselves**.

As the hearing aid anecdote suggests, design practices are changing statecraft but not necessarily democratising it. Indeed, in reframing the citizen as a user, design has pioneered 'neuroliberal' governing techniques (Whitehead et al. 2017). This is the *mêtic* aspect of design – a cunning mode of practice that may serve any master. **Design is not inherently democratising, but rather a new form of governmentality**.

The idealist tendency in design leads to an over-emphasis on discussing good and proper values. Unfortunately, a sincere belief in one's own good intentions may breed social hubris. The dangerous designer is not the one who lacks the right convictions – it is the one who fails to recognise that outcomes matter more than one's own good intentions. **Sincerity and good intentions are not enough; on the contrary, they all too often mask lamentable outcomes.**

This list of correctives is written in negatives, in 'nots'. Nevertheless, realism's challenge is how to turn skepticism into creativity. We see this as the central challenge of applying realism to design; how to inform design processes with a sober perspective on power, yet not get bogged down in zero-sum impossibilities or paralysing cynicism.

The suggested remedy to the dominant idealist blinders in participatory and social modes of design is a perspective we call 'Realdesign', a designerly take on *Realpolitik*. With this take, we suggest taking notice of the betrayal, corruption, and hypocrisy that taints much design practice taking place in the name of 'the people'. Starting from Lenin's 'who whom?' question, that realist theorist Raymond Geuss (2008, 23) expands into 'who < does > what to whom in whose interest?' For everyday design, this translates to questioning who is being used in the name of the 'user'. That is, users and participants all too often come to act as pawns, if not human shields, in the power

games that designers all too naively step into. When failing the interests of the people whose name designers act, doubling down on empathy offers no hope of redemption.

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