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# Designing Consent: Can Design Thinking Manufacture Democratic Capitalism?


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# **Designing Consent: Can Design Thinking Manufacture Democratic Capitalism?**

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**Abstract:** This article interrogates the proposition, recently put forward by design thinking advocates Tim Brown and Roger Martin, that democratic capitalism needs design thinking. More specifically, it assesses three problematics that emerge when design thinking moves from corporate settings to the public sphere of democratic deliberation. The text thus discusses the potential for design thinking to be used as a tool for the exercise of cybernetic control in the context of a mounting dissent with social injustice, and the extent to which it may be deployed as a means to “guide” democracy. Furthermore, it posits that the expectations placed on design thinking reflect the design profession’s agnostic approach to *realpolitik*.

**Keywords:** Design thinking; idealism; realism; guided democracy; democratic experimentalism; cybernetics.

## **Designing Consent: Can Design Thinking Manufacture Democratic Capitalism?**

The past decade has not been a good one for democratic capitalism. In the larger economies of what used to be called the “developed”, “first world”, inequality levels are back to where they were in the early 1900s, prior to the welfare reforms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Piketty, 2014: 438). The havoc wreaked by the financial crisis of 2008 has yet to be mitigated: Wage-earners have yet to recover from the damage done to their standard of life (ILO, 2014). Moreover, the members of the middle class are realising that, while the members of the “one percent” or the “one percentile” have grown increasingly wealthy (Stiglitz, 2011), their real wages have remained stagnant since the 1980s. In the US, this discontent is coupled with a decreasing trust in the politicians of a “gridlocked” Washington (Fukuyama, 2014), and with an evident narrowing of the political class on both sides of the Atlantic (Runciman, 2014). The European Union is suffering from the after-effects of the euro crisis that followed the financial crisis, with growing rift between member states over migration, austerity programmes, and a discontent with the European institutions as such. Meanwhile, authoritarian capitalist models (Gat, 2007) - the “Asian values” capitalism of Lee Kuan Yew, the “sovereign democracy” of Vladimir Putin, the “illiberal new state” of Viktor Orbán - seems to make headway across the world.

In a recent conversation republished at the *Harvard Business Review* website, Tim Brown and Roger Martin have recently suggested that design thinking may rejuvenate the “infrastructure” of democratic capitalism (Brown, Martin & Berger, 2014). Martin, the former dean at Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, and IDEO-president Tim Brown have both been active proponents of the discourse around design thinking, spearheading its use as a mode of business development, and as a means of managing innovation (Brown, 2008, 2009; Martin, 2009). According to IDEO (2015), design thinking implies an iterative process of inspiration, ideation and implementation, integrating “the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success”.

In discussing why “capitalism needs design thinking”, Brown and Martin suggest that it may spur innovation in the service provision of the public sector, and thus secure the “belief in the system” as a whole. These propositions emerge at a time when design thinking has established itself as a generic method for creative problem solving, supposedly applicable in a wide range of domains. Though initially discussed within academia, managers and the design profession, the idea of design thinking rejuvenating democratic polities is slowly entering the public mind, not the least through the current trends of service design and social innovation (cf. Leadbeater & Cottam, 2008; Manzini, 2015). Indeed, the *Washington Times* recently reported on how the Danish municipality of Hostelbro used design thinking to revamp the services provided to its elderly population (King, 2013). By consulting the design firm Hatch & Bloom, the article reports, the municipality found new solutions that had a “dramatic impact on employee and customer satisfaction”. In other words, “experimenting with prototyped solutions can produce astounding results”.

This article will interrogate the very proposition that democratic capitalism needs design thinking. More specifically, it will discuss whether design thinking methods can address the causes of the crises described above, and the extent to which such methods are suitable for facilitating democracy. As a quick entry point to what follows, it is worth noting a slight semantic shift in the *Washington Times* case study: The elderly are construed as “customers” of public services, whose satisfaction is to be secured. They are not, however, construed as citizens that possess a right to hold officials to account, and - when necessary - eject them

from office. Nor are they construed as political subjects engaged in turbulent conflicts and power struggles. Thus, the translation of design thinking from corporate settings to public service ones is not necessarily an unproblematic operation.

Therefore, this article will discuss the grand project of introducing design thinking in the public infrastructure of democratic capitalism in relation to three problematics:

1. Martin posits that “the belief in [the democratic capitalist] system” may be about to fade away, and that citizens may be tempted by the prospect of doing “radical things that over history haven’t worked out so well”. He suggests that design thinking can be used as an instrument to improve the “infrastructure” of democratic capitalism, thus instilling more belief in the system, and in turn saving the system itself. Such optimism, however, needs to be juxtaposed with the prospect of design thinking being used in non-democratic settings: Nothing prevents design thinking from becoming particularly useful within authoritarian capitalist systems. The systematic use of citizen feedback may equally be deployed as a power tool with which to control “disturbances” in a cyberneticist fashion.
2. Martin suggests that designers may use the “hidden secret of IDEO, sophisticated intervention design” to help a new set of users uncover new solutions for the democratic capitalist system. However, if design professionals, not citizens, become the agents of civic experimentation, what does this mean for democracy itself? On this issue, design thinking’s approach to experimentation can be assessed using democratic theory. Since the publication of Lippmann’s deliberation on public opinion (1922) and Bernays’ (1928) treatise on propaganda, there has been a long-standing discussion on whether democracies in fact need elites that manufacture consent. This discussion has also concerned the extent to which public officials should be allowed to consult public relations and advertising firms to manage public opinion. With the rise of design thinking, there are good grounds to argue that design firms ought to become subject to similar scrutiny.
3. The Brown-Martin conversation is premised on the fact that improved service offers to citizen-consumers can mitigate the current social, economic, and democratic crisis. On the other hand, what if the causes of these crises are not of a merely managerial nature? In other words, user feedback generation and rapid prototyping may prove wholly inadequate instruments with which to solve problems that ultimately stem from the *realpolitik* of power imbalances and social injustices. Here, “*realpolitik*” designates a power-centric view of politics based on practical and material factors rather than on theoretical or ethical objectives.

These three concerns will be discussed in relation to some general tendencies within the design thinking literature. More specifically, it will comment upon some of the propositions put forward in the above-mentioned Brown-Martin conversation. Through this modus operandi, the text discusses the above-mentioned problematics that emerge from the proposition that democratic capitalism needs design thinking. These problematics are surveyed under the following headings: “Design thinking and the political uses of feedback”; “Design thinking and the agency of experimentation”; and “Design, idealism, and realism”. The argument then proceeds with a concluding discussion on how to address these concerns. Indeed, just as we question the idea of design being inherently good, or the idea of design thinking necessarily lending itself to democratic aims, we do not suggest that design or design thinking is inherently bad or undemocratic. So, along with voicing concerns, we will search for ways to compensate for the perils that we highlight.

### **Design thinking and the political uses of feedback**

"I'm worried that democratic capitalism depends on the vast majority of the citizenry believing in the system and that the belief in that system is going to fade away and we may try something else or do radical things that over history haven't worked out so well." Thus reads Roger Martin's overarching objective for introducing design thinking in the infrastructure of democratic capitalism. "I want to study that and come up with ways to make this democratic capitalist system work better." (Brown, Martin & Berger, 2014) Through iterative experiments and rapid prototyping that generate user feedback, the services offered to user-citizens will be improved, securing the belief in this system and keeping citizens from yearning for alternative systems and radical change. However, one may also imagine how politics may use citizen feedback in more sinister ways.

A survey of design thinking and political uses of feedback may start from a brief historical review of design thinking's conception of feedback. The profound influence design thinking has had on the last years of design discourse stems not only from the interventions of Martin and Brown. It also emerges from the recent development within which design has moved from being a reflexive practice (Schön, 1983) to design being acknowledged as a solver of complex or wicked problems. This latter discourse is, as we shall see, heavily influenced by systems and cybernetic thinking (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Buchanan, 1992). Whereas the earlier discourses on design, dominated by the reflexive mode of inquiry (Schön, 1983) or its specific "ways of knowing" (Lawson, 1980; Cross, 2006) where the specific skills of the designer were in focus in order to produce meaning, design thinking opened the innovative tools of design to everyone and promises highly tangible results. Boland and Collopy's influential book *Managing as Designing* (2004), had just some years before advanced the notion how "the design attitude" should have a general applicability onto managerial and governmental issues, from the establishments of "action nets" (Czarniawska, 2004) to the design of the Australian tax system (Preston, 2004).

When design thinking became the explicit approach of IDEO, the world's largest design company, or "innovation company" as they prefer to be called, design was to be widely associated with innovation and action rather than aesthetic contemplation. IDEO advanced unconventional methods such as design-ethnographies, and firmly established rapid prototyping as a well-known term within managerial discourse. The appearance of rapid prototyping technologies in the mid-1980s came with a range of new methods of design, not least participatory and user-centred design. The snowballing of computers in both design and mass production processes reduced the costly tooling of production, and made quicker iterations in production possible. As suggested by Sass and Oxman (2006) rapid prototyping integrates two separate stages in the design process, the "conceptual stage materialization" and the "construction information modelling", situating agency for designers between the conceptual stage and the real-world construction by quick modelling, fabrication and feedback. Today, these techniques have made their way into the business world, via notions of "beta-testing" and the "Minimum Viable Product" testing of the lean start-up movement (Ries, 2011).

The applied, impact and innovation-driven approach of design thinking emerges from systems thinking. Design theorists such as Klaus Krippendorff (2006) draw upon cybernetic models to further the discourse on understanding how design deals with complex issues. As design no longer primarily occurs within a hierarchically organized manufacturer, but instead through complex networks of stakeholders, Krippendorff argues that designers can no longer command what is to be designed. Instead, they must produce convincing proposals that mobilize interest and support:

If designers work within a network of stakeholders, which can make or break a design, their proposals need to enrol them into the project of a design. Without the authority that stems from being allied with a powerful institution, the only way that designers' proposals can succeed in a market driven, democratic, information based society is by being compelling communications. (Krippendorff, 2006: 1388)

We are now in a position to explore the issue of political uses of feedback. In Krippendorff's account, we are again confronted with the problem of how to generate order in a complex world. During the post-war era, it emerged in the discussion on cybernetics. According to Norbert Wiener (1948), the pioneer of the discipline, cybernetics is defined as "the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine". Wiener's innovation was to found a new science of control and communication that focused on the gap between the desired behavior of a system, on the one hand and the actual behavior of that system, on the other. Cybernetics can be understood as an endeavor to close this gap, much like a thermostat controls and regulates temperature. As Galison (1994) points out, this idea emerged in the context of a specific practical concern. Wiener's "interest in feedback mechanisms, communication technology, and nonlinear processes" was originally put to use for the purpose of "hitting fast maneuverable bombers with ground-based artillery" (Galison, 1994: 232). However, cybernetic thought quickly spread beyond such applications, and it was not long before the design profession joined the discussion on cybernetics. For instance, in the 1950s, the design education at the Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm) set off on an ambitious attempt to turn design into a scientific activity, linking it to the new science of cybernetics (Glanville, 2007: 1176).

While the use of cybernetic conceptions of prototype-driven feedback processes may seem innocuous when applied in corporate settings, the adoption of design thinking within polities may have considerable political consequences.<sup>1</sup> One account of the profoundly political effects of the spread of cybernetics is provided by the Tiqqun collective (2010). For Tiqqun, the cybernetic hypothesis constitutes "a new fable that after the Second World War has definitively supplanted the liberal hypothesis". Whereas the liberal hypothesis was based on the idea of the essentially animal spirits of self-interested individuals, the cybernetic hypothesis imagines human behaviour as subject to re-programming. The cyberneticist sees "each individual behaviour as something 'piloted', in the last analysis, by the need for the survival of a 'system' that makes it possible, and which it must contribute to". The survival of the system is secured through intricate mechanisms of feedback. "Retro-action" is "key to the system's regulation", where signals of disturbances are followed by actions that push the system back to an equilibrium state. Cybernetics, then, "is the project of recreating the world within an infinite feedback loop."

Tiqqun's nightmare vision of a society governed by a totalist conception of society – a society which treats all signals of dissent as "events of disturbance" to the equilibrium, which in turn are brought into a monstrous apparatus of feedback loops – does read like science fiction. However, beyond the hyperbole, there is one key lesson to be taken away from this account: Polities' use of constant feedback from citizens is in no way a guarantor of democratic governance – especially if the explicit aim is to use this technique to secure the current order. Indeed, the Communist Party of China is becoming increasingly skilled in getting close to the needs of their user-citizens, experimenting with opinion polls, focus groups and public

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the famous design school in Ulm closed in 1968, in the context of a very infected political climate where its students and teachers had turned design into something highly controversial, not something depoliticized (Maldonado 1972).

consultations (Leonard, 2008). For the party, the explicit aim is to use their deep understanding of the needs of the “users” to secure the one-party system.

However, one may see how design thinking can be applied in similar ways in democratic capitalist systems – the type of system that Tiqqun’s critique is directed at. Protests or calls for radical change that threaten the current institutional framework – such as the failing institutions that produced the economic, social, and democratic crises mentioned in the introduction – can be interpreted as feedback signals that necessitate a cybernetic response. In such a scenario, citizen feedback may be used as a means to make “our” democratic capitalism more like the authoritarian capitalist powers currently on the rise (Žižek, 2015).

On a more modest note, recall the *Washington Post* case study mentioned in the introduction: How can the elderly respond to a potential decline in performance of the Danish system? The design thinking intervention may actually make them less likely to use their right to kick their politicians out of office. On the other hand, design thinking may well increase the ability of the elderly to use their “voice” (Hirschman, 1970) to improve their situation. However, as we shall see in the next section, one may question the extent to which the intervening design professionals assist in the articulation of this voice.

### **Design thinking and the agency of experimentation**

In the conversation with Tim Brown, Roger Martin declares that “what I want to do is do experiments, actually try stuff out, and help people who say sorry Roger, that’s just the way it is around here, that’s the only way we can or have ever done it.” He adds: “I actually think it’s sort of the hidden secret of IDEO, sophisticated intervention design.” (Brown, Martin & Berger, 2014) Thus, through intervening in, and experimenting with, the activities of users, the design thinking professional may uncover new solutions that fit the needs of these users. Similarly, in the *Washington Post* case study, a design consultancy was brought in to experiment with the user-citizens, that is, the elderly. In both of these cases, there seems to be a clear demarcation between the experimenter (IDEO, and Hatch & Bloom) and the experimentee (the users of public services). The latter group may be allowed to partake in co-creation, but their involvement is nevertheless structured by the intervening designers. Thus, the main agency of the experimentation is situated in the designer camp, not among the users.

When using design thinking in corporate settings, this location of agency is a question of mere efficiency and expediency: The degree to which the company chooses to engage users as active experimenters is a reflection of its preferred innovation strategy. However, when design thinking is applied in the context of democracy, wider issues are at stake. In fact, depending on where the experimenting agency is located, different models of democracy are enacted. Here, the famous 1920s debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey is useful for explicating these stakes.

The Lippmann-Dewey debate concerned the role of the public in the ever-more complex, and ever-more mediated, technologically advanced modern societies. Lippmann (1922) set out his critique of the idea that citizens in democracies are capable of making informed decisions. For Lippmann, ordinary citizens cannot perceive all the intricacies of “the real environment” in which they live, and must therefore live their lives according to mental images of the world. The fact that they have to resort to such “fictions”, with only a limited connection to the real world raises a number of risks. Therefore, Lippmann called for the abandonment of “the theory of the omniscient citizen” (Lippmann, 1922: 364) which underpins traditional notions of democracy. Instead, he proposed that “centres of management” should be engaged in “the manufacture of consent”, preparing a certain number of well-informed

opinions, which citizens may adopt or reject. The resulting system would be a form of "guided democracy".

Dewey (1927) responded to Lippmann's critique, arguing that citizens can be active participants in the deliberations that lead to well-informed opinions. According to him, joint issues of concern "spark a public into being" (Marres, 2005), drawing select citizens into one of a multitude of concurrent deliberations. In these, the citizen is a creative participant, not merely choosing from the well-formed opinions supplied by elites. In this way, Dewey promotes a "democratic experimentalism". Given his preference for direct forms of participation rather than representative modes of democracy (Sabel, 2012: 40), this implies that the individual citizen is the agent of experimentation, actively participating in a cooperative inquiry. Thus, rather than being dependent on moulders of opinion that elicit the voices of citizens, Dewey insisted that democracy implies that citizens develop their own vocabularies. This enables them to speak for themselves, even on technical or complex issues, using their own words.

The contemporary discourse on design thinking, as applied to democratic life, seems more compatible with Lippmann's guided democracy than with Dewey's democratic experimentalism.<sup>2</sup> Again, as seen above, design thinking discourse tends to focus on the designer as the prime experimenting agent. User-citizens play a secondary role, and their input is elicited by the iterative interventions of the designer. As Martin suggests, design thinking interventions by the likes of IDEO renders users talkative. Though there are merits to Lippmann's analysis of the shortcomings of democracy, there are nevertheless problems that arise from the idea of a guided democracy. The "manufacturing of consent" that is a prerequisite for this democratic model does invariably place power in the hands of elites. It is on this point that the issue of designers' complicity with power comes to the fore.

Here, one may note an analogy between how designers, on the one hand, and public relations professionals, on the other, may support existing power structures. Indeed, one could interpret Martin's position as one in which he suggests that design thinking could provide some well-needed PR for democratic capitalism. One key contributor to the discussion on guided democracy was Edward Bernays, the father of modern public relations. In his landmark text on propaganda, Bernays (1928) argued that the "chaos" of diverging views among the citizenry had to be "organised", in order for democracy to work. The new task of organising this chaos, he suggested, was to be filled by the emerging PR profession. This analysis proved prescient: Since then, the political realm has become permeated by these techniques of persuasion and coercion. However, from a historical perspective, one may discern a similar connection between design and political power. Indeed, a historical survey of this issue may start from Socrates' critique of the sophists. For him, the sophists - intellectuals and teachers who did not primarily seek truth in itself, but for a fee - employed their rhetoric in order to persuade and manipulate public opinion. On a similar note, Machiavelli highlights how it is the world of appearances that leads to power in politics, as "the great majority of mankind are satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities and are often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are." (Machiavelli, 2003: 76)

This analogy between design and PR can also be traced in contemporary design literature. Design has a tradition of dealing with the world of appearances and form, and as Adrian Forty

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<sup>2</sup> Note the quote from Italian designer Bruno Munari, printed on the walls of the Design Museum in London: "Progress means simplifying, not complicating." (Glanville, 2007: 1196) Much like Lippmann's "centers of management" simplify the messy reality to citizens, one may imagine design thinkers as professionals that simplify the world for users.



has specifically pointed out, also emerged as a political endeavour to administer control and change social norms. Forty (1986) points to how the early Wedgwood success in rationalization of production was achieved by hiring modellers that combined forms "that both suited the methods of manufacture and satisfied the tastes of the market". He continues: "In this the modellers were occupied in exactly the same task as every subsequent designer." (Forty, 1986: 41). However, as Forty posits, it is not only the task of modellers and designers to enable the merger of production and consumption, but also to change consumer behaviours and beliefs. One of his examples is the introduction of the vacuum cleaner, which displaced servants under the rationale that having a "mechanical servant" was more clean and reliable, and part of a sanitary reform that swept through society with the help of advertising (Forty, 1986: 175ff).

The connection between design and the moulding of opinion is also discussed by Papanek (1985), with reference to the societal impact of design:

There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today (Papanek, 1985: ix).

To Papanek, design should be a task of societal problem solving, engaging with the profound matters of the world, not a play on the surface of things in the realm of consumerism. His critique against advertising design not only concerns its shallowness or unsustainable promotion of consumerism, but he also challenges the way most of us (still) think of design; as a game of merely satisfying consumer desire, where design is making the world primarily a realm of "consumers" rather than the plurality of what he calls the real world. The next section will continue to discuss how the design community relates to the real nature of the world.

### **Design, idealism and realism**

Let's return to the financial crisis - and the subsequent bailout of the rich at the expense of the poor - discussed in the introduction. Since the financial and democratic meltdown, there has been widespread discussion about how to find a socially just resolution of the events that unfolded, and about how to prevent further crises. What would be a design thinking approach to this problem? Tim Brown suggests that it would involve studying infrastructures like the financial system "from the perspective of what happens if you radically redesign this system". This would be done "in order to meet some purpose that we're clear about and in order to meet the needs of the participants in this system in a better way" (Brown, Martin & Berger, 2014). However, one could argue that in the political battles waged during the fallout from the financial crisis, the resolution was not so much one of unclear purposes or unexplored needs of participants in the system. Rather, the outcomes of the battles were dictated by *realpolitik* - the realist Hobbesian-Machiavellian power games at the upper echelons of government, making sure the system reproduced their interests (cf. Hobbes, 1994; Morgenthau, 2006). Indeed, according to the Wall Street occupants in Zuccotti Park, as well as to mainstream observers, the bailout was forged through the close connection between Wall Street and both of the major political parties in Washington.

Brown's remark above resonates with an "idealist" tendency that predominates within the wider design discourse. This is partly reflected in the position of Herbert Simon (1969), who states that design devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones. But designers all too often fail to address the basic question: *preferred by*

*whom, and in the interest of whom?* Within the framework of traditional political science, the designer's naive approach to politics would resonate with the idealist camp, where all conflicts are simply misunderstandings and can turn into consensus with clear communication and endless negotiations. One example that resonates with a design agenda is political scientist Bernard Crick's perspective on politics as "the art of the possible", to see how things can be, and where politics is the solution to problem which chooses conciliation rather than violence and coercion (Crick, 1962).

Such idealism stands in contrast to the realists who see things as they are, a perspective untainted by half-baked ethics or ideal theory. To the realist, politics is not primarily a journey towards a better world for all, but rather an ugly competition over scarce resources, individual survival, and ultimately - power. As noted by political philosopher Raymond Geuss, politics is a form of applied craft rather than a fine art: it is messy, dirty, foul, and cannot be readily be codified by purist theories or ideals (Geuss, 2008: 15f). Indeed, this was Tocqueville's great insight from America - while democracy may yield beautiful outcomes, the practicing of it is ugly (Runciman, 2013: 2). This ugliness is rarely acknowledged within the discourse on design. In this discourse, the world is gently getting closer to the preferred state, one problem creatively solved at the time. Note the claim of Stefano Marzano at Philips Corporate Design: "Design is a political act. Every time we design a product we are making a statement about the direction the world will move in." (Cited in Cooper & Press, 1995: 1) Designers are thus quick to acknowledge that they change the world, but simultaneously ignore the unoptimized, messy and contested nature of politics in itself. The direction the world moves in is not neutral but tainted by ideology, power and not seldom marked by blood.

Designers are often spoken of as "agents of change", under the proposition that design changes things, it makes things better, and if it somehow does not live up to our expectations we usually say that it is bad design. Bad design, bad outcomes, can always be fixed by new iterations; new editions. From the perspective of designers, good design is never corrupt, it has a sense of function, honesty and transparency that politics can never have. Design can be optimized, whereas politics per se is a form of friction. There thus seems to be a desire to escape the dirty politics that the realist tends to focus on, and this may well be an inherent element of design: designers want action, they work quickly to create tangible change. In design literature, this is often noted without much controversy. For example, design theorist Brigitte Borja de Mozota posits:

Design has an avant-garde spirit. While not generating major innovations, the designer anticipates new needs and creates new answers to meet constraints, while integrating progressive technologies. Design is a partner and initiator of change in society. Therefore, it is a partner in the management of change in organizations (Borja de Mozota, 2003: 38).

Borja de Mozota uses the example of famous industrial designer Philippe Starck to underline her point about "change in society," and Starck also exhibits a similar approach to design as Martin did above:

The urgent thing today is not to create a car or a chair that is more beautiful than another. The "beautiful" is a concept that is obsolete for the time being and does not respond to the urgency facing society today, where barbarity has reared its head again. What we need to do today is to replace aesthetic objects with semantic objects, which results in replacing the beautiful with the good. We must start again from scratch so that these objects and machines serve us, so that the

objects is good for us, in order to live better (Starck, quoted in Borja de Mozota, 2003: 38).

If designers acknowledge any political problems in design itself, it is usually found in the methods, not in the very ontology of design itself. For example, the classic paradigm of problem-solving may have an elitist or engineer-like touch, thus such characteristics can be challenged by a more open approach where design as a method is more evenly distributed around the planet through social design or open design and where "best design is replaced by just design" (Laitio, 2011). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that both design methods and design practitioners are per definition good: Design rids the world from problems, and designers are the good ones, they are the heroes of functionality, progress and peace - and eventually, of self-deception, as issues of social conflict and dissensus are simply ignored. As Martin argues, echoing Herbert Simon: "Innovation is about seeing the world not as it is, but as it could be." (Martin, 2009)

In the face of the crises outlined above, the design profession would arguably benefit from a healthy dose of realism. D-schools should not only teach their students to think about the ideal world that could be, but also cultivate a recognition of the power games of the world that is. This would put designers in a position to reorient their gaze, focusing on the *realpolitik*-related power games that underlie the widening gaps between haves and have-nots. It would also enable them to - in contrast to the above-mentioned self-image of the benevolent designer - assess the risk of becoming complicit in such power games.

### **Concluding discussion**

So far, the argument has pointed to various ways in which design may be complicit in supporting elites. This point could be developed further. The science of cybernetics has famously - or infamously - emerged in government think tanks, in relation to the cold war (Tiqqun, 2001; DeLanda, 1991). The phenomenal spread of design thinking has also meant that it has become adopted within the field manuals for commanders in the US Army, something proudly acknowledged by Martin in an entry in the design blog *Design Observer* (Martin, 2010). On a similar note, it may be noteworthy that the designerly approach to complex theatres of war also has entered the military academies, not only with continental philosophy (Weizman, 2006), but also with celebrated design theorists such as Buchanan, Lawson, Margolis, Krippendorff, Czarniawska and Thackara (Naveh, 2007). Furthermore, Rittel and Webber's ideas on complex wicked problems, which are supposedly best solved by design, is an essential component in United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) manual 525-5-500, Commander's Appreciation and Campaign Design (TRADOC, 2008: 9), also reviewed and praised on the US Army webpage (cf. Ancker & Flynn, 2010). At times, the design thinking and cybernetics connection is emphasised: Theorists such as Brigade General Huba Wass de Czege at the United States Army School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) proposes more adaptive learning cycles, reminiscent of the cybernetic models. These learning cycles, which must be networked into the interconnected operational environment, coordinates a wide variety of decisions, that in turn controls several units (Wass de Czege, 2009), forms a complexity which calls upon an associative "art of design" (Banach & Ryan, 2009; Hernández, 2010). The realists within the military sector have indeed been quick to adopt design thinking in today's doctrines of complex warfare.

In response to the three problematics addressed in sections two, three and four, one may imagine three operations that may prevent problematic uses of design thinking in politics. First, is there a way of using design thinking to reshape our democracy, without resorting to the cybernetic hypothesis? In the above discussion on the political uses of feedback, it is important to remember that it is not feedback in itself that may lead design thinking towards

non-democratic uses. Arguably, the problem with the cybernetic hypothesis is its totalist conception of society. In the words of Tiqqun, "the cybernetic hypothesis is a relative of not only the totalitarian ideologies, but also of all the Holisms, mysticisms, and solidarities, like those of Durkheim, the functionalists, or the Marxists; it merely takes over from them". While there are many critiques of totalising accounts of society, we may here make use of the one provided by DeLanda (2006). In his "new philosophy of society", DeLanda critiques the idea of "organismic wholes" (DeLanda, 2006: 8). According to the organismic metaphor, society emerges as a whole system, based on "relations of interiority". This implies that the component parts of a system are "constituted by the very relations they have to other parts in the whole" (DeLanda, 2006: 9). Like organs in a body, each component has a fixed role to play, and any disturbance to these set functions is likely to kill that organism: it is a body that preferably should not be tinkered with. Given such a view of society, experimentation may only take the form of streamlining the given functions of the current order; *autopoiesis* becomes the key analytical concept.

In opposition to this organismic view, DeLanda proposes that society is to be understood as a nested set of assemblages. These assemblages, in turn, emerge from collections of heterogeneous components, based on "relations of exteriority". This implies that "a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different" (DeLanda, 2006: 10). So, rather than a closed organism, DeLanda - following Gilles Deleuze - imagines society more like a vast collection of symbiotically co-evolved components. This means that there is no predetermined set of relations between "organs" that must be defended. This shift from the organismic metaphor to thinking in terms of assemblages has profound political implications. For instance, it would involve not seeing outbreaks of dissent such as Occupy Wall Street as events that disturb the democratic capitalism as we know it. Seeing society as nested assemblages instead implies that the type of pre-figurative politics (Graeber, 2013: 233) practiced in Zuccotti Park are key to the experimental development with new "plug-ins" that do not merely streamline the processes of current system, but instead changes it in a more fundamental manner. While radical politics may not be for everyone, designers should - at the very least - be aware of the perils of a cyberneticist appropriation of design thinking methods.

Secondly, the current tendency to side with the guided democracy model should be countered with attempts to use design to actualise Dewey's model of democratic experimentalism. For designer, this may involve steering clear from an over-reliance on design thinking as we know it, combined with increased use of participatory design techniques. However, as we have argued elsewhere (Palmås & von Busch, 2015), in the context of the shift from government to governance (Swyngedouw, 2005), such approaches are by no means a silver bullet as design participation itself may become a form of coercion.

Thirdly, as already suggested towards the end of section four, we suggest that the design profession must move from all-out idealism to a (reluctant) realism. Practitioners will have to come to terms with how the cybernetic foundation of design thinking may gravitate towards practices where feedback is used to preserve systemic status quo. For the realist, there is no social or systemic progress, there can be no real innovation within the social realm, as the power relations of society is a zero-sum game. As Geuss argues, one must always ask the question "Who does what to whom for whose benefit?" (Geuss, 2008: 25f) The design of the social - agency, power, interests - may be shifted or patched, but the Machiavellian rules of power will hinder any idealist dream to make a better man. By all means, the cybernetic heritage of design thinking even tacitly posits that there is no social progress in sight: the spirit of man is eternally corrupt, social man is a wolf to his fellow man, and thus needs to be restrained and controlled. Rather, the world is a cruel struggle for survival and power, and

designers will need to face such reality in order not to be corrupted by their own naive ideals. Only if they recognise the existence of a *realpolitik* that they cannot escape, and acknowledge that the crises that ail democratic capitalism cannot only be solved by optimized service design, designers can come to challenge the current status quo infusing real political perspective on the world. Indeed, such a realist-infused design thinking may well produce some radical results.

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