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Design Power and Potential Future of Global Organization of Life

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In this paper I wish to discuss the changing patterns of power globally, however gradually, and the special role of design in determining who has power in the current technology-driven information age. I first explore some of the foundational issues and concepts to set the stage before I delve into some, what arguably may be, contentious arguments.

Wealth and Capital

Firstly, it can be argued that wealth, which for the purposes of our discussion here is defined as *amassed units of what is deemed valuable, in the sense of having meaningful consequences*, has been the key source of power across human history. Yet, what wealth is has been decided through a cultural construction, that is, different things have come to be construed to have value and worthy of being amassed. For example, land ownership constituted the major form of wealth during the times of monarchies and aristocracy. Amassing land gave the landowners the ability to keep peasants to work the land, and the means to build and feed armies to conquer more land or protect lands they owned (Braudel 1995). Thus, they could rule over the lands they owned and the people who lived on these lands, with the size and quality (e.g., fertility) of land constituting the basis of power.

This feudal period was largely preceded by more communal and tribal populations, now widely considered as traditional societies, which were dominated by spiritual cultures rather than a material culture. Before material culture became dominant and material wealth, such as land, commanded what was valued, access to spiritual wealth – that is, the amount of confidence invested by the community in a person's access to spiritual (sometimes labeled divine) insights – imbued people with a privileged position in the power complex.

With the growth of the bourgeoisie, financial wealth largely measured in monetary units, took center stage. Yet, simply having large amounts of financial wealth did not directly translate into power. This wealth had to be transformed into capital in order to command power (Marx 1976). Indeed, wealth on its own is often not sufficient to command power; it has to be put to use in a specific way that translates it into a means of power. In capitalism, for example, financial wealth had to enter into a relation with labor, thereby turning it into capital: to employ labor to create exchange value, the surplus of which could then be appropriated to expand capital

further. Power was the consequence of this relation translating financial wealth into capital as the means of power.

In the heyday of capital power, during the 20th century, another kind of wealth began taking center stage, that is, became dominant; wealth of knowledge or information (Foucault 1980; Toffler 1991). Escalation of a certain kind of wealth to a position of dominance, as the source of power, does not mean that other forms are completely overshadowed. Instead, in what Foucault has popularized as 'discourses of power' (Foucault 1980), a certain means of power, such as capital, takes a key role that integrates all other means of power. In effect, I am positing here that we need to recognize that power, in the evolved and layered contemporaneous world, is a complex network.

Iconographic Culture

Similar to capital transforming financial wealth into a means of power, wealth of knowledge or information also requires to be transformed into a means of power through a special mode of use of it. Under currently emerging conditions, it must be a means that is particularly effective under the conditions of a contemporary market society. Following the dominance of spiritual cultures in traditional societies (see, e.g., Campbell 1991), modern societies initially adopted material cultures (Levine 2001; Miller 1987). In late modernity the symbolic essence of human experience on Earth has eventually broken through its spiritual and material subjugation by earlier cultures largely due to the inability of these cultures to persuade people of their legitimacy – given the ongoing rising problems of ecological, political, economic, and social failures, inequalities, and oppressions resulting from these cultures. Yet, conditions prevalent in contemporary culture, specifically the dominant presence of capitalism, neoliberalism, and post-Fordism in contemporary market society (Slater and Tonkiss 2001; Hardt and Negri 2000; Harvey 2007; also, Dholakia, Ozgun and Atik 2021 in the marketing theory discourses), and the imperfections of currently practiced democracies along with a postmodern turn (Lyotard 1984), have stunted the symbolic to its iconographic mode (Fırat 2015). In an iconographic culture, influentially omnipresent commercial references, which seep into everyday social, political, and economic discourses, hark back to what resembles familiar and pleasant experiences and constantly evoke consumptive behaviors and desires. In such an environment, iconic brands define lifestyles and icons become a key ingredient of the processes of humans relating to and communicating with each other as well as relating to the objects of their creation.

Early modern material cultures were highly influenced by burgeoning sciences. They focused on the material forces guiding the principles of the universe. To gain control over natural disasters and take greater control of their own destiny (Angus 1989), people relied on scientific findings and products of scientific technology, such as building dams and structures that could withstand natural disasters. The result was an indexical culture, where indexical representations of facts and universal principles were paramount and human action was guided by scientific knowledge. In contrast, impressions of what matter, based on signifiers that simulate familiar and attractive experiences and phenomena, substitute for knowledge in an iconographic culture (Fırat 2017). Persuasive, effective communication becomes more influential than scientific findings. Accordingly, postmodernist scholars observe growing influence of simulacra (Baudrillard 1994), spectacle and spectacular moments (Debord 1983). Instead of logical arguments constructed through evidenced building blocks, communications using sophisticated technological strategies become paramount. This principle guides all domains of culture, from marketing campaigns in politics to economic practices of the market, such as advertising.

In this sense, we are indeed experiencing an iconographic culture, which understandably aligns well with the ascendance of information as the wealth that arguably constitutes the prominent potential source of power in the contemporary society. Information is constituted of signs and the icon is a specific type of sign based on semblance (Peirce1991). The significant difference of an icon from a symbol, which is an arbitrary cultural sign free of necessary link to any earlier presence, is that it necessarily repeats, represents, and resembles that which is or which has been. Thus, in an iconographic culture escape from currently prominent and influential discourses and imaginary is greatly difficult. A symbolic culture, on the other hand, would provide greater possibilities for knowledge to be used in ways that propose change and alternatives to status quo.

The iconographic culture has significant consequences. With developments in specifically communication technologies larger and larger numbers of people seem to be participating in public discussions and engaging in entrepreneurial initiatives in platform organizations and social media, for example. Yet, while these activities on web platforms give many a sense of having voice and of democracy, much of this participation and engagement is, true to an iconographic culture, a reproduction of what is present and/or appropriated and co-opted for commercially productive ends (Benkler 2006; Cova and Dalli 2009; Denegri-Knott and Zwick 2012).

Design

I suggest that the special mode of use of knowledge or information that transforms this wealth into a means of power in contemporary culture is *design*. Looking at all the literature I could find about design, I haven't been able to find a definition of design(ing) that clearly differentiates it from other concepts, such as planning or creating art or organizing or structuring or crafting. That is, what is designing apart from all those other similar yet different constructs; or what part of all those other activities is the part that we can attribute to design? What is it that makes design significant that interest in it has grown exponentially (see, e.g., Brown 2009; Merchant 2018; Shove et al. 2007) in the last decades? Why is design that entity that transforms the wealth of knowledge or information into a means of power?

First, to fill the absence in the literature and provide a foundation for the following discussion here, I define design as *the patterning of relationships*. This is to recognize the special role of design, which admittedly may indeed be also a part of planning, organizing, art creation, crafting, etc., among their other constituents in any or all of these processes. Thus, design in a painting, for example, is that part where the relationships of objects, colors, etc., in the painting are put into a pattern; or in creating furniture, again design is that part where the relationships among the different parts of an object – for example a chair – such as the legs, armrests, seat, back are patterned. Here the term pattern is used as a *configuration that is consistent, that persists, and that has continuity*. That is, when designed, the relationships are not haphazard but have an intended consistency. This intended consistency will have a purpose that may arguably be functional or aesthetic.

This consistent configuration, that is the patterning, consequently design, is what provides any structure, organization, plan, or art its essential character, keeping it as a consistent and cohesive whole and giving it its imposing presence. I think that it is the cultural recognition of this aspect, if even only tacitly and/or unconsciously, has provoked the growing interest in design. Whoever controls design of structures, organizations, etc., or in general the cultural order or system, therefore, controls how this order or system will perform and what likely output will most consistently result from this order. Consequently, control of design will result in power in this age of wealth in the form of information or knowledge.

Clearly, design is not a new phenomenon of our time; it has been part of human culture in conquering nature, in creating tools, language, architecture, agriculture, in practically all aspects of culture. What makes it particularly pertinent today for power per se is its significance in translating knowledge, the prominent form of wealth at this time, into a means of

influence and control, similar to how capital translated financial wealth into power.

Indeed, using knowledge to design relationships that are alluring and that invite engagement in a specific historical context is the means of determining actions, interactions, and outcomes, therefore, the means to power. There are many examples of this in contemporary times. We have witnessed these examples in recent decades. Several contemporary corporations – including Google (Alphabet), Facebook (Meta), Amazon, and Microsoft – that have become among the most powerful corporate entities with the very high brand equities, were started by people who had scarce or no access to capital, but now command enormous amounts of it. They have managed this by designing organizations based on their often specific knowledge or on information they gained privileged access to, that responded to the relationships that people at a specific time and context were seeking to have with each other, as well as with information and objects with strong symbolic significations.

Corporatization

The foregoing observations – along with contemporary prevailing economic, political, and social conditions – have significant implications for markets and processes of development in our globalizing world. Among the prevailing conditions a key one is the growing social and political role that corporations play along with their dominant presence in the economic sphere (Winkler 2019). Indeed, corporations – especially in capitalist economies – have increasingly gained rights that historically were rights that only individuals had. They have increasingly become players with political and even religious rights, just as if they were human subjects. They can, for example, participate in making choices among political candidates by contributing to their campaigns (consider Citizens United decision of the U.S. Supreme Court), they can impose the religious beliefs their owners hold on the selection of employees (consider the case of the Hobby Lobby, and again, the decision made in this case by the U.S. Supreme Court). What may be even more significant is the consequent and complementary development of the corporatization of key institutions in society, from educational institutions, such as universities, to governments representing the state. The ideology of governing all institutions as if they were business corporations has been gaining ground with the growing influence of neoliberalism in culture (Harvey 2007), along with the complementary diffusion of post-Fordism expanding the economic productivity considerations and imperatives from production plants to all institutions, even to producing and organizing everyday private lives and lifestyles

(Deleuze 1992; Lash and Lury 2007) in ways that will help to increase market efficiency. Through ideological messaging and incentive systems, people are encouraged to sacrifice their social lives and relations with their families and friends, even during their off-work hours, to continue working at home to create value for their corporations; and relatedly, they are encouraged to adopt consumptive lifestyles where they seek to fulfill all their needs by provisioning economically through the market (dominated, of course, by the mega-corporatized entities) rather than through convivial social relations.

Examples of this development are abundant. As one example, public universities in the U.S.A. are being encouraged by state governments to act as if they are profit centers. For this purpose – so that public universities are not subsidized from state budgets – campuses of these universities are furnished with 'innovation and commercialization' centers to incentivize academic faculty members to innovate commodities with marketable potentials and find ways to commercialize them. When thus successful, the faculty member and the university are to share in the revenues generated, eventually enabling the university to finance its own operations. Thus, the university becomes a business-like organization and academic faculty its revenue generating employees. It is, then, not surprising that students are increasingly considered to be 'consumers' and education a 'product' rather than an intellectual process toward developing an informed citizenry. The fact that such developments erode the historic role of the academy is no longer a concern for those who readily buy into the ideology that corporate economic efficiency model is applicable and should be applied to all institutions of society.

Another example of this turn to corporate logic for all institutions is the trend in how government agencies are working, especially in advanced capitalist economies. The idea that efficiency in government is the same as efficiency in business corporations is infiltrating these agencies; they are increasingly required to perform according to business principles rather than public service principles (Toynbee and Walker 2017). Conservative politicians especially profess that, to become more efficient, government agencies must adopt the business logic. Committees in government departments that make most of the policies and decisions of action are increasingly dominated by corporate representatives. Consequently, it is not a surprise to many that, for example, the oversight of airplane safety and tests of its own planes was left to the Boeing Corporation by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (Van Cleave 2019).

As corporatization diffuses the logic of conceptualizing all institutions as business organizations, a logic of efficiency of organizing in economistic

terms is becoming a uniform rationale, and the principles of organization or organizing as a corporate entity also become increasingly uniform. With these developments it is becoming more important to recognize the nature of organizations and the changes that may be occurring in this nature. Especially significant is developing insights into the discourses of power regarding organizations to understand and prepare for the future constitution of human relations with and within organizations, which then extend to organization of everyday lives.

First, organizations, specifically corporations, are becoming the most consequential actors in society controlling the largest financial resources (Herman 1981) and also the designing human relations within and with organizations. They are now the most forceful agents. To advance what is likely to be a contested argument, corporations are now more powerful agents than even individual capitalists. Granted, capitalists' economic interests are currently aligned with corporate power and economic goals, thus the class interest of the capitalists finds its institutionalization in the form of the corporate entity. In what may be an ironic twist, this institutionalization significantly lifts, in a sense, the burden of having to maintain and fight for the class interest from individual capitalists' shoulders. Furthermore, this institutionalization helps to mask and diminish the visibility of the capitalist class as the culprit behind problems of capitalism: inequalities, exploitation of people and despoliation of nature, etc. For those who are largely politically unconscious, corporations become the faceless targets of blame rather than the class system that has thus been institutionalized in the form of corporatization. Yet, paradoxically, because of the way that corporations are constituted, they seem to provide – at least superficially – the means to all people to become share owners, micro-capitalists, thereby blurring class distinctions for the politically naive and giving them a largely false hope of having a substantive share in the bounty generated as well as in the decisions made by the corporations.

Earlier observers of this trend sometimes called it corporate capitalism (Perrow 2002; Sklar 1988). The key characteristic of this form of organizing is that the managers of corporations, whether they are proper members of the capitalist class or not, manage the corporations to optimize financial returns and capital accumulation. A more recent extension of this trend has been the growing influence of *finanzkapital* (Dholakia 2011; Hilferding 1910/2006), that is, financialization of capital (Epstein 2005) such that financial wealth accumulation is prioritized over all forms of material production. Thus, speculation in financial markets, for example, guides rather than follows capital investments. In what used to be considered Second World countries, such as the Russian Federation or the People's

Republic of China, we observe states taking the form of corporate management of their economies rather than moving toward the erstwhile espoused forms of worker-led communism. Contrary to earlier visions, interest in economic gains overshadows social and political aims. Today, a further extension of these developments is the economics of the sign (Baudrillard 1981), which corresponds to the advent of design power in an iconographic culture as briefly mentioned before.

Control Society

Another prevailing condition of our time is the advent of control society (Deleuze 1992). Societies of control are different from societies of discipline (Foucault 1995) where self-discipline is manufactured through institutions that create spatial confinements (schools, hospitals, prisons, factories, etc.). Within the institutional walls, whether physical or metaphorical, behaviors deemed to be productive for the system are encouraged and conditioned. While not completely replacing disciplinary institutions, societies of control construct 'machines' (Deleuze 1992) that encourage and reinforce, through feedbacks and scores (for example, in education grade point average, in finance credit rating), people to discipline themselves, without confinement in an institutional milieu or space, to behave in certain ways because the scores and feedback they receive determine their access to resources in the future, thus determining their future lives. The 'machines', institutions such as social media and others in Deleuze's language, also collect constant data to predict and guide behaviors through data-driven marketing and incentives (Brusseau 2020) and persuasive information regarding consequences. In such societies the ability to design the machines — patterns of how data are collected, how feedbacks are given, how scores are determined, and how the efficacy measures of these platforms are communicated to the people — is paramount in the determination of who controls the way that human lives are organized.

Furthermore, the transition from society of discipline to society of control can be linked to the rise of neoliberalism (Harvey 2007) as the dominant ideology and the accompanying growth of post-Fordist sensibility (Lazzarato 1996). Indeed, neoliberal ideology has been increasingly promoted – from the second half of the 20th century – by conservative political parties, which have had some success in forming governments in many of the First World countries, and later by populist movements rising at the beginning of the 21st Century. This ideology has advocated abandonment of regulation by disciplinary institutions to, what is considered to be, the machinery mechanism of market competition. The ideology suggests, evidently incorrectly, that if left to its own workings, the market

will realize not only the principle of the economic domain, that of optimizing economic value production, but all modernist principles, including democracy and civility, principles of the political and social domains respectively. The market 'machine', then, applies all sorts of incentives and sanctions that make people internalize the discipline needed to contribute to market efficiency — maximization of economic value — without oversight by any disciplinary institution (Deleuze 1992).

In contrast to Fordist focus on efficient productivity in factories and offices, and in line with the neoliberal ideology, post-Fordism's focus is on the market (Dholakia, Ozgun and Atik 2021) and promotion of lifestyles that guarantee the overall efficiency of the market, thus of the economy as a whole. Externalization of employment in post-Fordism has been well recognized (Cappelli 1995; Vidal 2013). This externalization is not only in the sense of a decline in employee training and promotion within organizations nor, indeed, only in the sense of a rise in precarious work conditions (Moisander, Groβ and Eräranta 2018), such as subcontracting or temporary positions, but it also entails the externalizing of the mentality of working to assure productivity for the organization into homes and family lives of workers. Thus, the social lives of workers outside of official 'work hours' are sacrificed and their time is volunteered for maximizing productivity (Virno 2007). Thereby, the logic of economic productivity is diffused across society, and people self-control, to contribute to the economy's health and optimization by adopting lifestyles that support this purpose. Consequently, the market that was originally considered as a means to serve humanity's needs has become the end in contemporary culture, requiring humans to serve its economic growth purpose (Chomsky 1999).

Technologies

Given the significance of the market and corporations in contemporary society, it can be argued that understanding the future potentials for humanity may require insights into how they will be designed. Technologies – communication technologies and others, such as nano-technology, three-dimensional printing, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering – will represent impactful tools in this designing process, but arguably their selection for development and the uses they will be put to are largely culturally determined rather than independent of the political, social, and economic discourses. Consequently, given the foregoing observations, in our time, designing how corporate entities are organized will also largely determine how human lives are organized, which ultimately is of the greatest consequence for humanity.

Indeed, it is possible to argue that struggles across human history have largely been about disagreements regarding how human lives are to be organized. Marx and Engels (1967/1848) suggested that this struggle in history took the form of class struggles: groups that had and promoted different interests, based on structural positions they held in society, constituted contesting classes. Different organizations of life, different cultural orders or systems, privilege different values, ideologies, ways of doing things, classes of people; in general, each organization of life promotes a different set of privileges. Consequently, our task is to develop analytical insights into the likely organization(s) of life under the conditions observed above in an era of design power.

A current observation is that with new smart phones, pads, and computers many people – who are techno-active across the globe – become involved with platform organizations and social media, providing designers of these platforms with uncompensated immaterial labor and marketable information (Farrugia 2018; Lazzarato 1996; Rose and Spencer 2016). This condition will continue as long as the distribution of information and capabilities of design remain skewed. That is, although knowledge needed for putting it to design seems to be freely available on the web, once a platform organization is designed, others – except the original designers who manage the dominant platforms – are generally disallowed from making alterations or redesigns. Also, although usually started by individuals, once the designed organizations are corporatized, the necessities of corporate survival and growth take control of even the individuals who created them, with the 'free liberal spirits' falling in line with the corporatization of agency in contemporary culture. Currently, corporate subsistence still largely necessitates financial health, although this is not necessarily a historical universal. Yet, under current conditions, a few who have designed popularly used platform organizations come to constitute a new powerful class who then get access to other means of power, such as capital.

Design Power

What possibilities can be envisioned for more equitable distributions of design power under contemporary circumstances? Currently we are experiencing an increasing concentration of power through the forms that corporate organizations and platforms are taking as the era of design power dawns and, furthermore, various means of power, design and capital included, are integrating. Also, under the influences of discourses guided by an iconographic culture and neoliberal ideology, although there are many startup initiatives on the web almost all are seeking commercial success to

join the economic market system rather than proposing alternatives to it. The allure of the currently powerful imaginary – of having economic wealth, riches, and celebrity status to enjoy experiences that many have-nots cannot experience – is still ideologically very strong.

Under these circumstances it does not seem immediately realistic to expect systemic transformation, based on design power, as a mass movement. Design power, however, seems, at least at first glance, relatively easier to access than other means of power in history as it does not require control over substantial amounts of other resources. Some relevant information, which may be available on the web for someone reasonably capable of incisive search, and a creative and innovative mentality, it seems, may be sufficient. Yet also necessary is a consciousness that can break through the contemporary powerful ideology outlined in the foregoing discussions, and channel actions toward designing alternative organizations of life. Designs that present such alternative organizations of life – that initially even small communities may find alluring, substantive, and meaningful when experienced or observed – are most likely to be the seeds of future significant transformations. Under the heavy control of commercial interests in contemporary society, and conditions of neoliberal ideology being so dominant as discussed, this may still be a wishful expectation, yet at the same time, these small transformations seem like the only possibility of a greater change.

A further potential may be found in the concepts of schizophrenia and the rhizome proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983 and 1987) as possible means of escape from or radical breakdown of the societies of control. Both proposals have some merit yet may provide only temporal solutions to entrapment in organizations of life (orders) that by their nature — that is, by being an 'order'— require control and discipline, privileging certain principles of existence and behaviors while deprivileging others. The solution is likely to be temporal because, although schizophrenic[1] crisscrossing across borders or boundaries imposed by a singular order or rhizomatic structure-busting and random relational extensions enable liberation from oppressive patterns, they may also diminish the capacity for purposeful action and thus the possibility of designing and constructing preferred new orders. That is, schizophrenia and the rhizome may be more a means of escape than of the construction of the new. Consequently, a suggestion that can be proffered – for those seeking radical change – is that transformations will most likely occur as eventual and evolutionary

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[1] The term *multiphrenic* (see Fırat, Sherry and Venkatesh, 1994) may be preferable since schizophrenic suggests an uncontrollable, pathological state of existence rather than conscious radicalism.

transitions without abandoning the idea of order but producing an order of multiple orders rather than a single organization of life dominating over all others as was the case in modern culture as well as preceding and anti-modern[2] cultures.

Since many originally small alternative organizations of life are likely to be produced by designers who escape entrapment by an order, one can posit the possibility of a revolutionary progression toward tolerance for and even appreciation of multiple orders co-existing. Constructing and institutionalizing any order is potentially entrapping and, thus, the *freedom to* build a new organization of life, if one cannot at least periodically escape from it, can indeed become greatly constraining. Complete freedom from imposition requires *freedom from* along with *freedom to* (Fırat and Dholakia 1998). Existence of an order of multiple orders provides the chance to navigate among orders that one has preference for due to finding meaning and substance in one's experiences in the orders navigated thus also enabling finding a balance between freedom to and freedom from.

To end this essay, it is of value and of urgency to urge – to academic scholars and to creative folks – to start cataloging, massively and on a worldwide basis, instances and narratives of how design power models are emerging that are free from the pervasive control nets of corporatized entities, of financial capital, and of self-interest and social-enrichment obfuscating ideologies.

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[2] Anti-modern culture intends to destroy a modern order and replace it with another, as opposed to a postmodern culture, for example, which tolerates a modern order as long as it does not dominate over other orders.

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