

Vultures and Lambs: Design for all against all

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A common perspective on design, primarily suggested by cultural critic Vilem Flusser, is to see design as a lever or a process producing leverage. In his famous collection of essays, *The Shape of Things* (1999), the lever is a recurring metaphor. Following Flusser, the lever may serve as a great point of departure in a discussion on the egalitarian ideals of participatory design and the universalist imperative to design “for all.” In a similar way to how design “for all” breaks the elitism in who can utilize design, participation breaks the expert design to be design with or by all. But, if design is a lever, perhaps our basic question must be: how does it make the weak strong? Or to make the question more poignant: Who gains leverage, against whom, and in whose interest?

Participatory design, in its many forms and variations, has become a master category of contemporary design practice and thought. The utility of this approach is most often blurred in-between ethics—that it is “good”; function—that it is effective; and politics—that it is democratic. Even though the schools of user-centered, participatory and co-design have their own histories, methods and pedagogical imperatives, the very act of what “participation” is, and its universal “for all,” share the emphasis on empowering all individuals. The inclusive and generalist approach also share key components with the recent decade’s buzz in “design thinking” or the grassroots ideal of social innovation where “everyone designs” (Manzini 2015). Indeed,

today every design method worth its salt, it seems, must pledge allegiance to this ambiguous field of practice: inclusive participation, it seems, is mostly beyond disagreement and beyond scrutiny.

The idea of participation comes alongside an entourage of sub-concepts that somehow often dodge political scrutiny: such as open, collaboration and transparency. And ironically, but once something is labeled “participatory” or “for all”, it seems that no closer description is needed, as if the process of operating a participatory project is self-evident. As Cooke and Kothari (2001) notices, in the general discourse of participation, the approach in itself can never be bad, only less well executed, and the very category of participation seems to be the answer to everything, effectively hiding contradictions under the vague promise of democratic experimentalism.

The universal imperative to design “for all” shares with participatory design the noble trait of inclusion even if it has another trajectory. However, in their inclusive gesture, both design approaches share a broad invitation across the population. Likewise, they both also often aim to address the needs of disadvantaged stakeholders, which of course deserves praise, both from a historical perspective, where design has been a profession reserved to experts, but also from a contemporary stance, as politics across many democracies has turned all the more unequal if not outright authoritarian.

One way to approach one of the many political participatory qualities of the universal “for all,” is to connect it to the ideal of a transparent, open and engaging design process, bringing users and designers, or subjects and rulers, together. The politics of design may in

this sense reflect the politics of society. Such perspective brings us close to Karl Popper's famous critique of Plato's idealization of the Philosopher Kings to instead propose the ideal of the "open society", which has for most of the post-war period come to mean western liberal societies. As opposed to the "closed" societies, guided by absolute dogmas and truths, open societies operate by a decentered mode of socio-economic organization, where competing practices and ideas are ideally to bounce off each other and ensure liberty as members of society compete for status. Thus, Popper's open society is a mild and slightly idealized version of Hobbes state of nature where universal inclusion also resembles a civil strife of "all against all." In such case, does the leverage of design, when disseminated to "all" produce new hostile dynamics or even enemies?

The universal notion of designing "for all" is an ethical as much as practical promise. Its utopian attraction is, like the very notion of democracy, a slightly hypocritical undertaking. The "for all" suggests the aim is to facilitate the dissemination of design leverage to those usually excluded from design, but by being for all, it also suggests the leverage is equally distributed across the population: bringing the consent of "all" under a universal law of design. However, as Nietzsche suggests in the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887/1994), imposing one law equally for the vulture and the lamb can easily mean death for all the lambs. Participation, or designing "for all," may also become a way to treat all participants equally; both vultures and lambs. As suggested by political philosopher Raymond Geuss (2008), many forms of inclusiveness may come at the cost of the lambs, as the very formula of vague equality hides the unequal distribution of

agency and leverage, and effectively fails to recognize those who may need it the most.

Thus a central question participation faces in design is to better recognize the distribution of real power amongst stakeholders, and to create more concrete checks and balances for inclusive design which may better help negotiate the asymmetric dynamics of leverage. In the realm of participatory design, this must be a closer look at the dynamics between stakeholders, users, and clients, but also acknowledging the invested interests behind those hiring the designers in the first place, such as firms, NGOs, public sector or academy. Many of these interests may be virtuous, but seldom are donors truly selfless angels. Today, as it becomes more and more clear that the “open” and “participatory” trends in design are not only compatible with, but even constitutive of, the increasing inequality of the current economic paradigm, designers must ask themselves whose leverage they really increase. Who is really gaining leverage as “all” comes under the domain of design, that is; is the true leverage really working in favor of the weakest when we design “for all?”

The very basis for many community services on the Internet seems plagued by the idea of being “for all” and the epitome of participation. Yet, they also hide the powers of the platforms, or what has lately been called “platform capitalism.” Egalitarian platforms, where all users create equal profiles, may seem perfectly equal, however as much as it hides the inequalities of off-line life, the basis for the labor of online participation, it also effectively hides who is the user and who is used. Services may appear free but none of the providers are charities.

In a similar vein, as designers approach a participatory project, for example helping local artisans to redesign their products at a market to sell more products to visiting tourists, they may be drawn into similar asymmetric dynamics. Like in all design projects, a lot of conditions come smuggled in through the back door of the brief, effectively reproducing current power dynamics to fragmented problems with their specific solutions. For example, most often the central question of “agency” is vaguely modeled under an idea of *homo economicus*, where individual power means funneling citizen action in and through the open market. As designers often seek to empower participants by creating new stuff or service for markets, the economic activities of participants are pushed into the heavily biased “competition” on the “free market” with its asymmetrical distributions of agency and debt. To put it bluntly, designing for all, by treating all equally, risks reproducing or even aggravating economic inequalities as all agency gets processed through an asymmetric market. The tricky part is that “participation” and “for all” effectively hides the many points in the chain where asymmetric leverage happens: what may look like empowerment at one part of the chain may indeed turn into a form of disempowerment or corruption down the line.

Indeed, there is a risk the very success of universal participation may undermine the ethical and practical rationale to become dangerous to its core ideals. This is where the vultures return. As media theorist McKenzie Wark (2013) has noted, today’s segmentation of the market has produced new ecologies of exploitation. In the merger between market and politics, also the culture industries have

morphed from entertainers to expropriators, or what he calls the move from culture industries to “vulture industries”. Not only do the vulture industries aim to capture and monetize the leisure time of workers, what the culture industries did before, but also make users become renters of the platforms by which they entertain each other for free, thus continuously laboring for the platforms. The very spectacle of authenticity has become yet another frontier of unequal market claims. The vulture industries capture almost every social interactions, and even the very processes of emancipation as the industries control the vectors of agency, prestige and status. The more people who participate increase the power of the vectors cutting a part of every instance of individual empowerment to actually disempower users on a larger level. To Wark, the fattening of “all” the lambs is a part the hunting game of the vultures.

In the case of the artisan market, the craft has become a form of design curated entertainment where tourists come to buy authentic crafts. As the artisans produce the reasons for visiting the market in the first place, the real money and power seeps out of their hands and goes elsewhere. Not only does it seep into the pockets of international charter and hotel chains, but the labor of authenticity of the artisans has now become packed in innovative ways and tested on the market, making it ready to be appropriated as yet another lifestyle article. The designers have managed well to make the local artisans participate in becoming a herd of lambs and the vultures are all sitting ready in the trees waiting to tap into the growing market and funnel out the real money: just compare how much the hotel guests usually pay for the night compared to the incomes of the local craftspeople who create the authentic atmosphere of the local mar-

ket the tourists come to visit. Indeed, the more successful the market, the more the tourists will “like” and “tweet” about its authenticity, increasing their own popularity as a way to feast on the local brand.

Who has gained leverage, against whom, and in whose interest? Of course the local artisans have gained agency, but most likely, they have also become competitors against each other and for a slice of a market dependent on much larger economic players, the hotels chains, charter and tourist corporations, and the tourists themselves. The artisans at the new market only get the small change of the larger influx of money, while most of their work is not funneled into a highly competitive market that may easily lead them into debt and more and more precarious working situations. From a perspective of leverage, “all” have been lifted; both lambs and vultures.

The idea here is not to end up in an overall abstract critique of “capitalism” or “neoliberalism”. We must stay concrete and return to the very real power of leverage. The labels of “participation” and “for all” always risks of merely reproducing status quo and produce consent to the overall asymmetries between lambs and vultures. Instead, we must ask more specifically what participation *does* in the form of agency: does it give participants access to power and real self-determination, and does it produce leverage against those who are already strong? How can designers be better at producing leverage which is *not* disseminated equally, that is “for all”, but aimed specifically to empower the weak? How does the weak gain leverage, against whom, and how does it mitigate the corrupting interests of potential vultures?

In the end, the weak may not need so much “equal opportunity” or “equal justice” as much as “equal power” – yet this last position is seldom explicit in design. How does the design for all and by all better ensure to help empower the weak, so not to implicitly enhance socio-economic inequalities under the guise of a false egalitarianism.

To return to the local artisan market, designers could ask; how do we ensure we produce “equal power,” that is, not facilitate the expropriation of labor from the poorest artisans, users or stakeholders towards the vulture industries? Can the artisans escape only being reduced to the authentic entertainment for the larger vultures? Can they organize differently, form cooperatives to coordinate their efforts and profits and invest to better tap into the tourist industry in more egalitarian ways, find ways to also house the tourists, or even lobby to effect policies to ensure a better overall share? Can they find ways to limit the impact of the vultures, and also reduce the risk of producing new vultures amongst their own?

Like the democratic experiment itself, universal participation is a process with no ready-made answers. Freedom and togetherness are always ridden by interpersonal conflict. However, like any other process of leverage, checks and balances may be our best path to promote more equal power. And this may also include designing leverage more explicitly for the weakest. Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. Be careful: designing for “all”, equally for lambs and vultures, may help the vultures more than the lambs.

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