

**TITLE**

*Designing dissent: some counter-hegemonic tactics in contemporary design*

**ABSTRACT**

Since the 1950s, two conceptions of design - the embellishment of artifacts and the functionalist problem-solving - have been progressively imposing themselves as hegemonic. In recent years, nonetheless, the consciousness of the social and environmental unbalances provoked by neo-liberal capitalism has fostered the emergence of new perspectives that may be defined as counter-hegemonic inasmuch as they challenge such dominant paradigms. Rather than being mere technicians or creative geniuses, the designers are turning themselves into agents of material, socio-cultural, and political transformation. What are the premises and objectives underlying these perspectives? How do they concretely engage with the hegemonic modes of design?

**KEYWORDS**

Gramsci, counter-hegemony, tactics, transformation, dissent

## **Designing dissent: some counter-hegemonic tactics in contemporary design**

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The recent history of design has been marked by two hegemonic conceptions: the functional problem-solving through useful artefacts, and the embellishment of artefacts themselves.

The notion of hegemony is employed here along the lines of the one put forward by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci as early as the 1930s. In his vision, hegemony is a whole set of values and beliefs shaped by the ruling classes, and accepted as the cultural norm also by the 'not empowered', i.e. the lower classes. It is the construction of consent that consolidates the power of those who already have it, a consent which is cultural even before being political (Gramsci, 1999).

The already mentioned conceptions of design can be referred to as hegemonic inasmuch as they have been perfectly shaped to serve the interests of what may be called the contemporary 'corporatocracy', but they have come to be widely accepted as valid even beyond the sphere of corporate powers. Moreover, the fact of 'serving the same master'

allows them to coexist quite peacefully, despite a long history of tensions – and even collisions – due to the enormous difference between their premises.

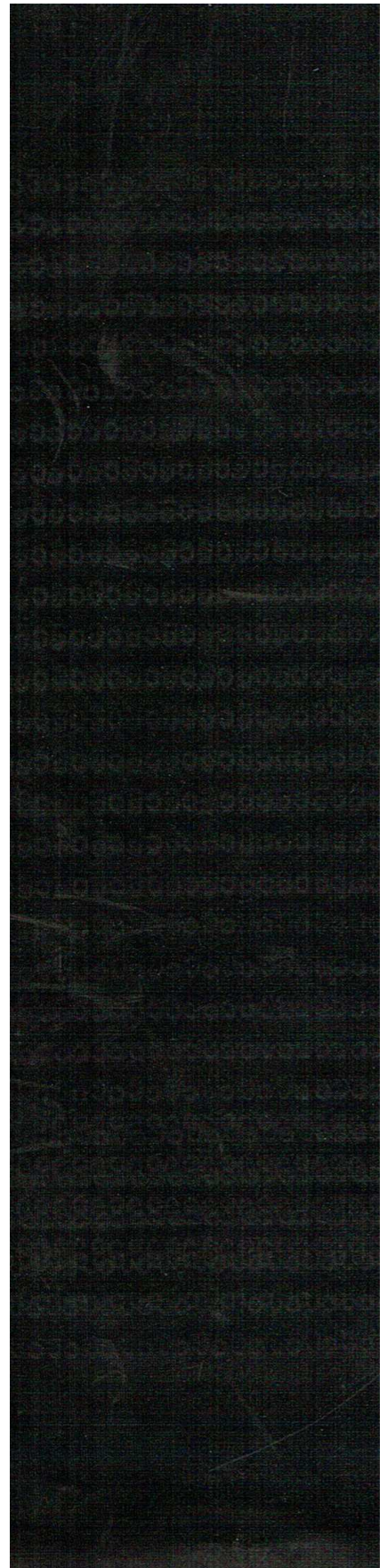
The model of the designer as ‘problem-solver’ imposed itself during the golden age of modernism: crucial is the experience of the Bauhaus and its approach to the problems of mass production. As it is known, the Bauhaus’ scientific and functionalist rationality emerged, most of all, from a socio-economic concern: finding the essential, ‘minimal’ forms of the objects with the objective of reducing their production costs and making them affordable for the working class.

During the second half of the 20th century this idea kept being the cornerstone for the designer’s work in the Socialist countries, and within some enlightened Western-European *milieux* such as the School of Ulm. Nevertheless, outside of that environments the functionalist vision gradually lost such philanthropic premises and ended up generating monsters: designers ‘scientifically’ distanced from the object of their work, whose only task is to respond in the most effective way to a set of pre-established needs, defined almost exclusively by the client:

The myth of objectivity does much to disengage the designers. [...] Strongly held personal convictions would seem inappropriate for the cool-headed, objective professional. Functionalism is narrowly defined in mere utilitarian terms. Too often this means serving the client’s definition of function – generally profits – over other concerns, including safety, the environment, and social/cultural/political aspects (McCoy, 2003).

While the idea of design as problem-solving was conquered by the all-encompassing logic of capitalism, leaving behind its original social concerns, the other one - design as styling - was born within the womb of that very capitalist logic: the designer who voluntarily reduces his/her work to the mere embellishment of commodities, with the objective of increasing their attractiveness on the market.

As it is known, this vision of the professional designer as creator of ‘aesthetic surplus value’ flourished in the United States after the great Depression and reached its peak in the early Fifties, thanks primarily to the work of the pioneers of the American Streamline: suffice it to mention the well-known definition of planned obsolescence by Brooks Stevens (i.e., “instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, and a little sooner than necessary”). A few years after, the sociologist Wright Mills pointed out that planned obsolescence also had a formal, aesthetic dimension, besides the technological and functional one: in other words, the desire to own something simply more beautiful. Along those same lines, the economist John Ken-



neth Galbraith polemically coined the expression “creation of desires” (Galbraith, 1959). In the realm of late capitalism, the aesthetics of the objects turned itself into a powerful mechanism for inducing consumption, and therefore, into a new battlefield for the corporate world. Walter Benjamin used the term dreaming in referring to the unconscious state of fascination, ‘auratic’ seduction brought about by the universe of commodities, and resorted to the terms *magic* and *phantasmagoria* in his description of the inner mechanisms of consumption (Benjamin, 1999). Arguably, the so-called ‘neuromarketing’ is just the latest development in this sense: human subconscious is widely recognized as the decisive field for the conquest of the potential buyer.

There have not been many alternatives to these hegemonic conceptions of design, apart from some enlightened environments such as the already mentioned School of Ulm in the early 1950, or the critical perspectives flourished in the Sixties and Seventies, whose potential lost momentum with the expansion of the market economy during the following decades.

In recent years, however, the increasing consciousness of the social and environmental unbalances provoked at a global scale by neo-liberal capitalism has fostered the emergence of brand new perspectives that may be defined as counter-hegemonic, insofar as they challenge those dominant paradigms and put such ‘disengagement’ of the designer into question: among them the open design, speculative design, inclusive design, design for social innovation, and transition design. In respect to this, the assumption of civil responsibilities that have been far afield from professional practices is the crucial feature of a transformation that s involving the whole sphere of design. Rather than remaining mere technicians or ‘creative geniuses’, the designers are consciously turning themselves into catalysts of material, socio-cultural, and political transformation.

What are the premises and the objectives of these design perspectives? How do they concretely engage with what we have called the ‘hegemonic modes’ of design, thus revealing their own ‘counter-hegemonic’ potential?

A first form of counter-hegemonic design is the one that considers both affordability and durability of the artifacts. Paradoxically and perversely enough, it can be said that the reduction of production costs – which was the main goal of the Bauhaus - has been accomplished by the globalized capitalism through the practice of offshoring. Nonetheless, the counter-hegemonic potential of the idea of affordability is still intact when coupled with the one of durability: producing both affordable and durable artifacts can still be considered a disruptive practice, insofar as it breaks with the endless circle of consumption. Mo-



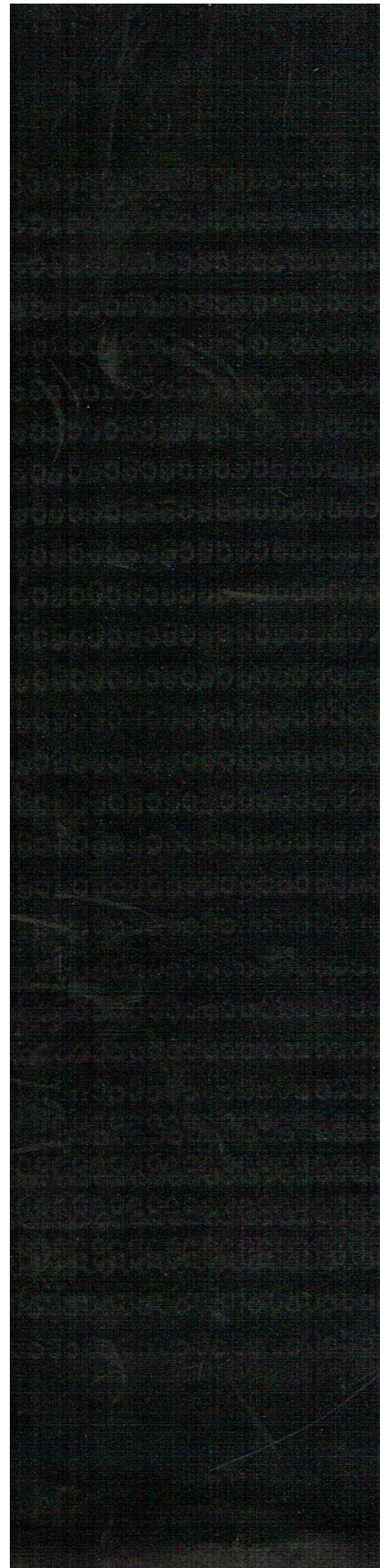
reover, in the affordable objects the use-value regains the center stage currently seized by the change value (which is, according to Marx, the essential feature of any commodity).

Secondly, counter-hegemonic design considers the modes of production of matter itself. By stressing the political, economic, and social implications of the exploitation of raw materials, sustainable and eco-design question the paradigm of the 'endless development', and shed light upon the major risks related to the capitalist waste of resources. Several design attitudes attend to this general issue, each one in its own way: design relying on poor materials or alternative energy; the so-called design for scarcity; the recycling and the open-ended transformation and re-utilization of objects (*tinkering*), which see in the 'form in act' a new 'form in potency'. To say it Bruno Latour's words, the main agency of eco-design is to turn *matter-of-fact* - indisputable objects, taken for granted in their timeless dimension - into *matter-of-concern*: i.e., complex issues of common interest (Latour, 2004).

Yet another major issue is the one of production of subjectivities, besides objects. In fact, it is possible to find an inherent bio-political character within the capitalist production of commodities, one of which is the employment of a range of sizes based on statistics. Hegemonic design focuses on the 'average subject' (average size, average height and weight, average abilities, and so on). An 'average' production that may satisfy the needs of a hypothetical 'majority' of consumers, but ends up also producing patterns of 'normalization' very hard to do away with. The hegemonic modes of design attend first and foremost to the subjects included in such definition of 'normality', thus excluding the ones whose features and capabilities place them outside that norm.

In this case, the counter-hegemonic response is the one of the *inclusive design*: i.e., a mode of design that considers the material necessities of those who are excluded from the dynamics of normalization. As it is known, inclusive and universal design are user-centered approaches, whose main imperative is to ensure the access to a certain product/service to any potential user, regardless of their age and psychophysical condition.

Nonetheless, there are further design perspectives that can be included within such horizon of counter-hegemony. This is the case of *speculative and critical design*, that take up the legacy of the Italian radical design of the 1960s and 1970s. Speculative and critical design place their reflections in the realm of possibility rather than the one of reality: their approach consists in giving shape to design proposals placed within imaginary scenarios, characterized by the profound impact of scientific development in fields such as biotechnology or ICT. These proposals challenge well-established assumptions and preconceptions



about the role artifacts play in our everyday life, and in doing so they act as critical devices: their aim is to shed light on the environmental, ethical and socio-political implications of any sort of technology, and to foster a reflection on which futures are not only possible, but also effectively desirable (Dunne and Raby, 2013). Speculative and critical design, then, are counter-hegemonic insofar as they question the utilitarian mode in which we usually deal with objects, this sort of 'instrumental rationality' that lies at the core of our relationship with the world. Speculative and critical design unfold other, 'possible' modes of dealing with objects: modes that enable to reflect upon them as well as upon the hidden political dimensions of the practices that shape our everyday life.

There are also design perspectives that generate subversions in the design methods themselves. As early as the 1970s, participatory design challenged both the mythology of the designer as a creative genius and the passive role of the user, who was asked to take part in the various stages of the design process. Even more radically, the so-called open design places itself in the wider framework of the 'free culture' theorized almost 15 years ago by Lawrence Lessig. The theoretical premises are, in this case, the acknowledgement of the intellectual and creative work as 'public domain' as well as the radical questioning of the traditional idea of copyright.

In contrast to the hegemonic exploitation of design objects/tools/services by the corporate world, in this vision designers are asked to claim their authority on the outcomes of their work and to turn themselves into 'possessors of their own modes of production' – in every field, from visual communication to architecture - through the use of free software and digital fabrication tools. They are also asked to teach users how to use such tools autonomously, so as to foster the development of other 'open' proposals beyond the sphere of private speculation. It is not possible yet to measure its effective capacity to influence the dynamics of large-scale production; however, this perspective constitutes one of the most significant contemporary contributions in terms of a re-formulation of the designer's work, because it reflects not only upon the premises and purposes of the profession, but also upon its concrete methodologies, techniques and materials. Open design focuses on a process of sharing, transforming, multiplying production thanks to a collective notion of agency.

The 'openness' of the design process is also fundamental in the case of design for social innovation and transition design: both these perspectives claim that real sustainability is always the outcome a slow process of socio-cultural transformation - fostered by new patterns of behavior and social organization – and try to understand how design can suggest new solutions capable of clearing the path in this direction,

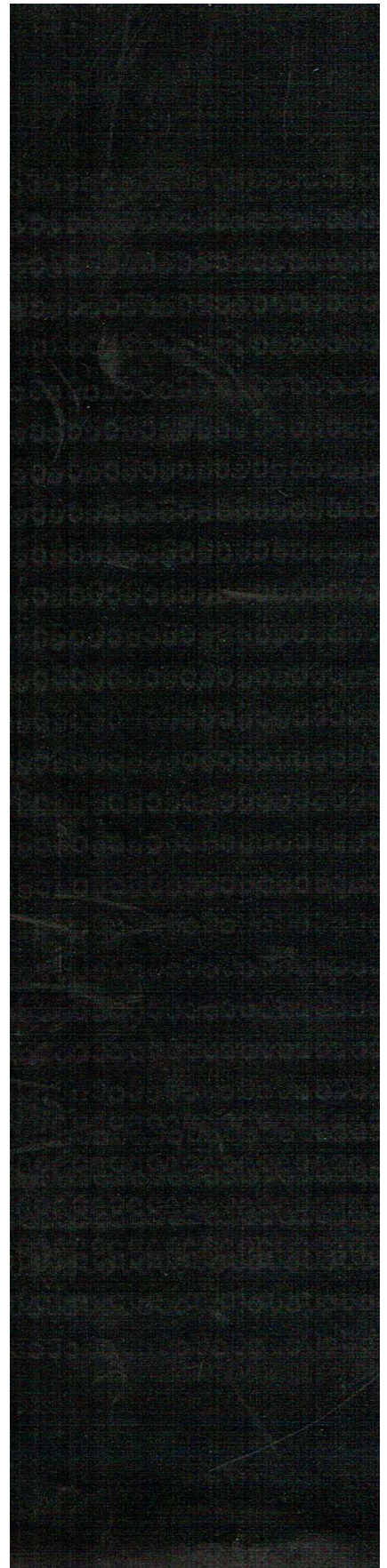


in material as well as cultural terms. As it is known, the stress is placed not only on initiatives promoted by professional designers, but first and foremost on collective, bottom-up processes in which the designer plays the role of mediator.

As it has been shown, the field of design currently includes a broad range of perspectives referring to the idea of social and environmental responsibility.

It must be also said, though, that the 'landscape' of contemporary counter-hegemony manifests itself as widely heterogeneous. In fact, we can define as 'counter-hegemonic' those design approaches that insist on both affordability and durability; the ones that consider the 'conditions of possibility' of matter itself, so as to reduce the waste of resources and to foster the re-use, the re-assemblage of objects, the hybridization of functions; the ones that consider the issue of the production of subjectivities, by abandoning the biopolitical notion of 'average subject' and fostering diversification; the ones that try to promote visions of the world that set themselves apart from the logic of 'instrumental reason'; the ones that foster processes of collective production, in contrast with the traditional *egolatry* of hegemonic design.

Arguably, one of the essential features of such counter-hegemony is that it cannot be conceived as a proper strategy, but as a plurality of tactics. As Michel de Certeau put it, strategy is the form of action of an established power – based on the notion of controllability, and on the clear distinction between what is placed inside and outside its realm – while tactic is the mode of the not-empowered, one that “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. Tactics must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities” (de Certeau, 1984: 16). In this sense, tactics take advantage from the necessity of re-defining and re-organizing themselves in relation to power. Nonetheless, they all share a common principle: the subversion of the traditional hierarchy between technical and critical dimension of the profession. This subversion is a direct attack against to the hegemonic modes of design as problem solving and embellishment, and leads to conceive the designer first and foremost as an intellectual: a professional able to ask herself the right questions before coming up with possible answers, and to reflect on the implications of her work as well as on her position within the productive process. If design is “the planning and patterning of any action towards a desirable, foreseeable end”, as Victor Papanek (1971: 3) stated, it is necessary to know why and, most of all, for whom such end is desirable: this means that every design action must come to grips with an irreducible contingency (which is, first and foremost, a political one).



In its wide range of expressions, counter-hegemonic design strives to constantly produce - and re-produce – enclaves of resistance and dissent both at material and cultural level, in which values and practices foreign to the neo-liberal logic are defined and put to the test: this is what Gramsci would have called a ‘war of position’ against hegemony (Gramsci, 1999: 495), with an ever-changing distribution of forces.

In such ‘war of position’, then, the concrete practice must count upon the support of theoretical elaboration, critical exercise and pedagogical commitment: in this sense - just as Gramsci himself would have said - counter-hegemonic design practices and counter-hegemonic design culture are two faces of the same coin, that must cooperate in elaborating new modes of understanding and transforming the world.

*\* The present article constitutes the translation - and partial re-elaboration - of a longer essay by the same author, published in Italian in a co-authored book.*

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