

Designs of the Oppressed

## Week 5 (10-16/11/2022): Userism and the Coloniality of Making

Rodrigo Gonzatto

Hello, I'm Rodrigo Freese Gonzatto from Curitiba, Parana, Brazil! This is an audio-lecture about userism and coloniality of making.

I will present the concept of "user" in three movements.

The **first movement** is to analyze the term "user" in the everyday thinking of traditional design spaces in capitalism. **What is a user?**

At first, it seems like an innocent word. The word "user" appears in Design discourses to designate the person who uses an artifact. But it is a common sense of naive consciousness alienated by the coloniality of making. The term hides a division of labor based on the alienation of labor and the hierarchization of knowledges and makings.

When the word "user" is said by designers, the "user" is a reference to an "other". Designers could not be the users, because designers produce artifacts. So, a user is someone different, who needs another name. What is that difference? The difference that enables designers to have the power of being advocates for users within a productive space?

While designers performed the super-specialized task of designing, users are regarded as "ignorant", who "don't know what they want"... or even "don't know how to use", because they can't understand how the artifacts were made, even if they are made to be "easy to use".

This dichotomy between use and design, knowledge and ignorance, consumption and labor, intellectual and manual labor... results in many others, reinforcing class, gender and race oppressions, for example.

We have called **userism** this naturalization of user oppression as an inevitable division of labor in Design. Userism is the ideology that puts that is only possible to design by this dichotomy. In this way, **userism** is a justification for the denial of the possibilities of historically oppressed social groups. Denial of the use and production of technologies for the production of their existences. Denial of developing their social handiness. In other words, denial of the search for new conditions that necessarily require overcoming historical oppressions.

The **second movement** that I will make is to negate this previous simplistic interpretation. In order not to operate only by the categories of the oppressor, we will look for gaps in that interpretation.

Look how curious: when a user demonstrates that they know how to make something, they are no longer called just a user. They are a hacker, an amateur designer, an everyday designer, a co-designer... As if they couldn't be a user and still do design.

However, we can look around and observe our daily life... and we quickly realize that users also design, create and produce. We do this because we need to repair objects, adapt systems, solve problems... it is always the user who ultimately manage the coupling person-artifact in a situated action.

Think about your family: how many things are solved with what you have available at hand. Adaptations, improvisations, *gambiarra*s, practical solutions....

Paulo Freire and Vieira Pinto teach us that there is no person that can not know how to do anything about design, artifacts and technologies. There is no absence if the person needs to know how to do something in order to survive in his or her reality. And it would be impossible for a group of people -- as professional designers -- to be able to account for all the design needs of all people's lives.

My desire is to say that we are all designers. However, this idea is also naïve. It is necessary to analyze people's context, their handiness, and the conditions of the mode of production of the society in which so-called users find themselves.

The users' making is as important as the designers' making: but the users' making usually happens in less favorable times and spaces for **the accumulation of the work necessary to develop autonomy**. While designers rely on their bosses' means of production, and the times and spaces of design more favorable to the production of the capitalist mode of production... while this, the making of users faces: non-recognition, invisibilization, patent regulations and intellectual property, impediment to repair, discouragement to infrastructure their work. All this prevents them from knowing and developing their design skills.

Finally, my **third movement** emerges with a second denial of that initial interpretation... that user is only the one who uses. Not just denying but, now, critically incorporating ideas. What is a concept of user more useful to face oppressions?

We have argued that user is a useful term as a **political concept**, if it makes us: 1) recognize the design of the oppressed, that are hidden by coloniality; and if helps us 2) claim the right of people to participate in the world they are part of.

Use is not the opposite of design. Use, design, work, fruition are dimensions of doing, making and knowing the world. Every user has an ontological vocation to develop their being. And they do this by transforming their worlds. The problem is that users were historically prevented from knowing and making. Even so, they resist and build with what they have available at hand, even if the knowledge and conditions useful to this are socially denied.

Not by chance, the coloniality of making operates through ideologies, politics, and market -- identifying, distinguishing, and hierarchizing the makings of the oppressors before the making of the oppressed. As a discipline and research area, Design participates in this social construction of users as people who have been alienated from important conditions for the production of their own existences.

After all, what Design do we want, if Design discipline produces knowledge and teaches practices that allows designers to develop and apply project methodologies and techniques so far from the users and so attached to the interests of the capital? And, on the other hand, how does Design also produce a **not-knowing and not-making** about Design, that continuously produces people who are prevented from developing their knowledge and doing about Design --- and do not have access to the means to continue developing themselves? How do we, designers, help to alienate users by producing forms of use, that prevents people of taking these objects for themselves.

It is necessary to think about the design of technologies in such a way that design is done together with the act of taking these technologies by the hands and building the learning of them. The production, education, and socialization of technologies must occur together with the quest to overcome oppression. In other words, a practice of making **with** the formation of a critical consciousness of reality.

