

Design of the oppressed

Week 2 (20-26/10/2022) - Design, politics, participation, and Paulo Freire

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In this reflection, I have chosen the concept of solidarity to exemplify my experience of engaging in the struggles of oppressed groups.

For Freire, solidarity is established when the search for solutions is done with people, not for people. Paternalistic solutions, based on supposed empathy, tend to hinder the development of true solidarity. Such solutions disregard the ontological vocation of people to become subjects of their own lives. Instead of empathy, this supposed help turns into welfarism, because it considers the other as a passive being, incapable of seeking and developing solutions to his problems.

The concept of solidarity has permeated my practice as a designer in recent years.

In my doctoral research, I joined a group of young people who live in a violent neighborhood in the city where I live - Belém do Pará, in the north of Brazil. These young people are mostly black and poor. Because they live in marginalized neighborhoods, they are considered criminals by the hegemonic media, that transmits the message that poor neighborhoods are taken over by drug trafficking and its residents live in criminality. In reality, in Brazil, young black and poor people are the main victims of the violence of the State, which considers their lives disposable.

To deny this false reality, the group started to create counter-narratives to the hegemonic discourse constructed by the media, through video documentaries filmed with cell phones. They also created a film club to discuss the oppressions they suffer, such as racism, social inequality, and sexual discrimination.

At the beginning of my alliance with them, I believed that I could work with participatory design to "improve" the visual communication created by the group, and also to train them in design so that they could create aesthetically superior solutions to the ones they were already developing. In other words, I wanted them to be able to express "good design," that is, canonical design.

As our relationship grew closer and I became less concerned with design and more concerned with the systemic oppressions they faced, my vision changed, and I began to see reality as they saw it. More than "putting myself in their shoes" and feeling their pain, I began to better understand their needs and engage in confronting the multiple oppressions they suffered.

For Freire, the oppressor is more than an individual who practices oppression. The oppressor can be a social system, a historical category, a cultural model, or a pedagogical model. It can also be an imposing form of designing . So instead of developing a project solution for them, we began to work together to reveal the oppressions they were experiencing and to design alternative futures.

During the pandemic, we promoted campaigns to collect food and hygiene materials to face the new coronavirus. We generated income for the collective by sponsoring documentary films, which denounce the abandonment conditions of children and young people in Brazil, the violence against women, and value the importance of reading skills in the political formation of youth. We also hold events to visibilize stories of women neighborhood leaders, transforming the urban landscape through graffiti. We offer art education workshops for neighborhood children.

As a result , we organized resistance practices by holding cultural circles, to dialogue about the challenges that young people needed to face after the pandemic tragedy.

These actions allowed the political strengthening of the group and, at the same time, consolidated the youth collective as an important producer of counter-hegemonic narratives of the city's periphery. Thus, the continuous experience that I established with the group allowed the insertion of design not only in conventional practices, such as graphic design, but mainly in practices of political articulation, in the expansion of the collective's network of partners, and in the organizational repositioning of the group.

In the search for solutions to the problems that became more serious with the pandemic, we followed a path of problematization. Driven by dialogue, we learned how to think and act critically about the imposed limitations. Based on that , we produced knowledge collectively.

Freire denounces that banking education prevents dialogue and problematization, promoting passivity and immobility. For me, seeing myself as an oppressor, through an imposing design practice, made me realize that I exercised a banking, antidialogical, and uncritical practice. By engaging in solidarity with young people, I was able to transform my practice and use design as a dialogical resource, to develop our critical consciousness together and seek ways to overcome oppression.

Unlike empathetic designers, who often prevent people from becoming aware of the oppressions around them, design can be practiced as a liberating cultural action. To do this, design must become an instrument of problematization, it must enable people to act critically on some imposed limitation. In a critical design approach, to overcome imposed limitations we need to improve collective

production of knowledge and the development of a critical sense, favoring liberation through praxis, which is action and reflection practiced together.

The relationship without dialog makes the construction of critical thinking impossible, because it stimulates the culture of silence. In a traditional design approach, the imposed limitation is seen as a design problem. And the design solution is achieved through design methodologies that often diverge from the methods already practiced by the investigated groups.

By understanding the limiting aspects that involve the lives of oppressed groups and generating ways to overcome them, we denounce the oppressive situation and announce its overcoming. Involving the other in the investigation of oppressions means promoting dialogue, means considering the other as a being, means practicing solidarity. Therefore, we can also practice design as an educational action. This action requires reflection on the individual and the environment in which he or she is inserted. In this exercise of reflection on the concreteness of his or her reality, the individual positions himself or herself as a subject. By integrating himself/herself into reality through reflection, he/she seeks answers to challenges and develops responses, generating culture. At the same time, by creating culture, the person makes history and intervenes in reality.

To conclude, in the world I want to build, solidarity will be the main reason for the design projects I intend to engage in.