

Not For Sale: Design and The Consumption Democracy

Ruben Pater, July 2024

Democracies around the world are in a state of crisis. Parliamentary politics have become paralyzed rituals of personality cults, unable to solve basic societal problems. The youth is turning its back on politicians as they cannot provide them with affordable housing or steady work contracts. Politicians sound like managers, outsourcing their political responsibility to the private sector while they can focus on getting reelected.

It's not just that politicians have changed, voters have changed too. Before people stayed with the same political party all their lives. Today we express ourselves through our identity, what we post on social media, and how we spend our money. Do we buy clothes at Shein or Humana? Are we vegan or do we eat meat? Do we ride an old Opel to work or a Tesla? For better or worse, politics has become a form of consumption.

Instead of forcing people to change their behavior, politicians prefer nudging people through market mechanisms, for example encouraging ethical consumption choices or creating demand for more sustainable products. For example, the idea that if we would all stop buying cigarettes, the tobacco industry would simply disappear. This voting with your wallet is a consequence of what Chantal Mouffe has called; the 'post-political'.^[1] In *On the Political* (Routledge: 2005), she explains that this phase of politics is 'beyond left and right' as what some would call a 'cosmopolitan democracy'; a state of politics 'in which individuals liberated from collective ties can now dedicate themselves to cultivating a diversity of lifestyles, unhindered by antiquated attachments'.^[2]

Bye Bye Politics, Hello Design!

This is good news for designers. If political change happens through consumption, designers can influence the very political fabric of society. After all, the logic of consumption is what designers know best. The design profession was born in the infancy of consumer society when the Industrial Revolution began to churn out low-quality objects, and a new class of artists/craftsmen were trained to improve the quality and aesthetics of mass produced objects. Designers did always wish to strive for higher ideals. A good example of this is the *Werkbund* founded in 1907. This alliance of artists and industrialists meant to improve the quality of mass-produced objects through the integration of crafts and new industrial techniques. This state-sponsored effort not only started to improve the competitive position of

the German industry, it also intended to make design affordable for everyone. Well-known examples are Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky's kitchen for single women (1926) and the high-quality social housing of *Das Neue Frankfurt* by architects like Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut (1925-1930). The backdrop was the polarized political situation of the 1920s. The designers of the *Werkbund* hoped that affordable quality design would help to establish social peace.

Now, a century later, the optimism of affordable production has disappeared behind the mountains of waste. We have never had so many products, but have they made our lives better? We find ourselves amid a climate crisis with no end in sight. The uncertainty of flexible contracts and automation of work has made us more prone to burnout and depression. Waves of privatization have now turned everything into products. Healthcare, electricity, water, and even natural areas are now branded and commodified. Cities and regions are branded, using design to lure investors and tourists for higher profits. Brands become the very fabric of our surroundings. Welcome to the *consumption democracy*.

Disillusioned with the failure of design to improve our lives, the latest trend in design is to focus less on consumption, creating experimental prototypes and non-material outcomes. Using methods like *speculative design*, *transition design*, and *social design*, designers visualize ethical concerns through small-scale exercises and presentations that aim to challenge the economic status quo. Unfortunately, even these strategies are easily appropriated to feed capitalism's infinite appetite for growth. [3] This is because our consumption today is in large part immaterial; we rent digital songs, buy apps for our phones, pay rent to watch movies or series online, and we can buy digital fashion to wear in the metaverse. As Wolfgang Fritz Haug wrote in 1971:

'Ultimately the aestheticization of commodities means that they tend to dissolve into enjoyable experiences, or into the appearance of those experiences, detached from the commodity itself. The tendency to sell these processes as material/immaterial types of commodities leaves no time to consider their use-value. By selling the commodity in the form of absolute consumption, the market remains unsatiated'. [4]

By Design or By Disaster

It has become painstakingly clear that unlimited capitalist growth, even if it is green growth, will not save us. If every person in the world would consume as much as the average German, we would need three planets. That means that in the wealthiest countries, degrowth

is the only ethical way towards a sustainable future. If we want to avoid a total collapse of society, we will have to learn to do with less, or, as degrowth scholars write; ‘degrowth will happen by design or by disaster’.[\[5\]](#)

The problem is that most of us don’t *want* to consume less. We are already struggling to pay our rents, we can’t find decent jobs and we don’t have pensions. Buying cheap stuff at Aldi or Action is about the only thing that gives us enjoyment. Populist parties play into these sentiments by promising a return to an imagined past life of ethnic purity, male domination, and material abundance. A better life with the promise that one can go on consuming without guilt, even if this means death and suffering for everyone else. Designers try to maintain neutrality in the face of polarized politics. The polarized political situation today is reminiscent of the 1920s when radical left-wing and fascist elements stood opposite of each other. We should remember that in the end the *Werkbund* couldn’t pacify the tension and was disbanded as soon as the fascists came into power.

Design for Degrowth

In times of political crisis, how can design help us to imagine a better life for everyone while consuming less? That question is a lot more complicated in our *consumption democracy*. Consumption has colonized all parts of society, not only politics but even our social life. We rent out our house on *Airbnb* instead of letting a friend stay there, we get an *Uber* instead of asking a friend to give us a ride, if we run out of milk, we order it to be delivered instead of asking the neighbor. Our social fabric is now unrecognizably replaced with the logic of money and property rights.

The first thing we can do as designers is to create moments that are social encounters rather than consumption. But to do this, we need the spaces to do so. A city like Frankfurt has some of the highest property prices in Germany, and during the last decades, many community centers and social spaces have been privatized and disappeared. The only spaces to meet each other are spaces of consumption; bars, coffee places, and restaurants. There are the occasional pop-up shops and temporary giveaway shops, as temporary solutions for anti-squatting or awaiting decisions of real-estate developers. But these are still forms of consumption of non-commercial social events. Community spaces shouldn’t be temporary but, like libraries and sports clubs, be public spaces guaranteed by the city. It is the city’s responsibility to have spaces in each neighborhood where people can meet, start libraries, cook together, give language courses, and provide the basis for social encounters that are not about consumption.

Secondly, designers should abandon the tendency to see each social encounter as a moment of sales. Even non-profit events are branded and adorned with logos, photographs are taken, email addresses are collected, we have to sign up, and leave reviews on social media. We should be able to organize events and make spaces where social interaction is the goal, nothing less, nothing more. Not everything needs to be branded, documented, posted, and tagged. In his book *Laziness Does Not Exist* (Simon & Schuster, 2022) social psychologist Devon Price points to non-commercial experiences that cannot be bought but have to be made at the moment; a nature walk, seeing a concert without recording it with your phone, getting lost in a city, talking and sharing with others without always having to consume something.

Design without consumption means understanding that social interactions are the very essence of our lives. Whether we make a design, we cook, raise children, go to a protest, or clean a space. They are productive economic activities where we share experiences and ideas. Design is merely one of the activities we can do together and can mean many things; fixing up a space, building a table, making signage, designing a newspaper or magazine, making a podcast, or making a film. Around Frankfurt we find spaces like the *Ada Kantine*, a solidarity kitchen in Frankfurt Bockenheim, cooking vegan food since 2020 with 200 volunteers. Others are the housing coops, art spaces, and squats that try to reclaim public spaces, not for sale but for sharing.

To do more of this we need time and resources. We cannot invest time in our communities or help each other if we are running around doing small jobs to make ends meet. That is why it's not enough to have the spaces; our rents need to go down, and we should receive financial benefits to engage in social community activities in our neighborhood. Places which are based on reciprocity shouldn't just be a pastime for the rich, but something everyone can enjoy and learn from. To have the time and space to grow and build more resilient communities for the future. Because only when people are involved in local grass roots initiatives and take decisions with their neighbors, only then will people feel part of a democracy again.

Notes

[1] Mouffe, Chantal, *On The Political: Thinking in Action*, Routledge, 2005.

[2] Mouffe, Chantal, *On The Political: Thinking in Action*, Routledge, 2005, pp.1

[3] Pater, Ruben, *CAPS LOCK: How capitalism took hold of graphic design, and how to escape from it*, Valiz, 2021.

[4] Haug, Wolfgang Fritz, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, 1986.

[5] Schmelzer, Matthias, *The Future is Degrowth*, Verso Books, 2020.

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