Review Essay

Politics of the Everyday (Designing in Dark Times)

by Ezio Manzini, series eds. Clive Dilnot and Eduardo Staszowski, trans. by Rachel Anne Coad (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). ISBN: 9781350053649, 136 pages, non-illustrated, softcover, $9.95. (Book Review Essay)

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In 2015 Kees Dorst published *Frame Innovation* and Ezio Manzini published *Design, When Everybody Designs* (both with MIT Press). I reviewed the two together[1] because they seemed to me to represent a sign of the new maturity of "design in the expanded field"—that is, higher order designing undertaken to bring about social change, rather than simply to create artifacts for improving a consumer's quality of life.

However, "change by design" can drift away from being designerly. Design thinking and co-design, in their more pervasive forms in corporate or government innovation contexts, seem far removed from the material craft of designing. Dorst has largely stopped referring to design, preferring instead Creative Intelligence. And now Manzini has published *The Politics of Everyday Life*—a title without the word design in it, although the book is the first in the Designing in Dark Times series from Bloomsbury.

If *Design, When Everybody Designs* provided a comprehensive account of the design theory behind Manzini's significant work with the global Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability Network, *The Politics of Everyday Life* is an important complement, building a wider political philosophy for the previous work. The book also feels more personal. As Manzini notes, "each of the four chapters that make up the book starts with an observation of situations located within 20 kilometers from where I live" (x); and throughout are notes about people or works that Manzini sees as significant in his intellectual development: Edgar Morin, Michel Serres, André Leroi-Gourhan, Paulo Rosa, and Carlo Donolo.

The political philosophy Manzini articulates is a sophisticated pragmatism, one that Manzini characterizes as bricolage—having a defined objective, but being open to using whatever is at hand to attain that outcome, "approximating… by reassembling pre-existing objects… [and] modifying their meaning," a way of designing that Manzini asserts "is the most applicable for operating in a world where we have to accept the complexity, whether we like it or not" (50–51).

1   Cameron Tonkinwise, "Committing to the Political Values of Post-Thing-Centered Designing (Teaching Designers How to Design How to Live Collaboratively)," *Design & Culture* 8, no.1 (2016): 139–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2016.1142355.

Manzini maintains the working assumption that most communities are experiencing a fluidity that demands that people make of their social lives a project—the "everybody designs [their own modes of existence]" of the previous book. He acknowledges in this book that this portrayal of society has been criticized for being a neoliberal power play: "In the world that [the critical theorist, Byung-Chul] Han describes, we are driven to use entrepreneurship, creativity, and therefore the design capability available to us, to exploit ourselves, very often inflicting on ourselves impracticable projects" (42). Manzini counters this pessimistic reading of the contemporary condition (the one in which the most popular subject at Stanford University is apparently "Design your Life") with a certain pragmatism: What is going wrong is not that "people are driven to make projects, but in how they do so" (43). This perspective requires refusing the view that society has become "an inescapable control system," (80) seeing it instead as:

> …resting on various logics and apparatus that may be very powerful but not omniscient and infallible. We can also see that in the multiplicity of possible realities and in the flaws of the organs of control collocate the local discontinuities I have been talking about, meaning the possibility for human beings to use their resources in terms of creativity and capability to do things in a different way from that expected (81).

Manzini argues that these possibilities for ways around neoliberalism lie in the following strategies:
- Choosing a capability approach rather than a needs approach (47);
- Enhancing capabilities by both skilling people up and combatting the top-down "technical, regulatory, financial and cultural limits of the system within which subjects interact" (55);
- Proceeding by way of collaboration rather than individually, which involves a mix of communities of interest and communities of purpose (62), as well as "designing coalitions" with other communities that allow the membership of these communities to evolve over time (64); and
- Helping these collaborations carefully mature over time into more efficient systems but without causing them to lose their original political qualities (71)—systems that might be commons (90) or that might look more like collaborative economies (which Manzini prefers over "sharing economies") (91) or even platform cooperatives (89).

This is a "scaling-out" and "scaling-deep" theory of change,[2] one that centers on finding the right kind of things to design that might afford a "transformative normality" (84). It is the difference between designing something that makes existing social practices and infrastructures easier or at least more tolerable, rather than designing things that empower those who are trying to build alternative forms of everday life, or more precisely things that service those who would like to build those alternatives but have not yet found the right way to effect those intentions. To illustrate, frustration with excess traffic might lead to a project to improve the quality of the commute by adding features to the car trip (like audiobooks or traffic by-passing navigational apps), thus reinforcing the existing system (78). Or that same frustration might be recast as a prompt for a project around cycling or carpooling, initiatives that might require political action (to ensure safe bike routes) or social action (to coordinate with other riders). Designing, or bricolaging, should, according to Manzini, focus on these kinds of "switch points" that enable "scaling-out": "In short, these local choices, and the local discontinuities they create, have a double effect: for those who take them up, they are solutions to immediate problems, but they can also influence the socio-technical system they are applied to at a larger scale, orienting its evolution in a different direction from what had appeared dominant until then" (79).

Manzini is explicit that this design-based approach to redirecting our societies involves a political theory that is less about state-based representative democracy (which was the focus of Manzini and Victor Margolin's "Stand Up for Democracy Initiative"[3]), and more concerned with "project-centred democracy" (99). For Manzini, the "project" qualifier signals not just a more "participatory" form of direct democracy, but also one that privileges action over speech: "[T]hey are forms of participation in which decision-making is directly linked with putting things into practice. It is not only a question of talking about what to do but also of doing what has been talked about. In other words, the people discussing must also be in a position to actually do what has been discussed" (114).

This requirement for who gets to participate in decision-making seems to overcome the earth-endangering fiascos resulting from the combination of populism and corporate influence that dominates current electoral politics. However, it also seems to risk restricting participation to those who already have demonstrated a capacity to "actually do"; only those who are able to do something get to talk about what to do. Manzini sees a virtuous circle—of people collaborating with people on capability building (social innovation), and so in turn then building their capability for collaborating on other projects with other people (project-centered democracy). The conception nevertheless begs the question: What

2   Michele-Lee Moore, Darcy Riddell, and Dana Vocisano, "Scaling out, Scaling up, Scaling Deep: Strategies of Non-Profits in Advancing Systemic Social Innovation," *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* 58 (2015): 67–84.

3   See www.democracy-design.org (accessed July 14, 2020.).

fosters a more collaborative society? Is there a risk that more collaboration occurs only by those already capable of collaborating? This exclusivity is the problem with pragmatism in general; its apparent openness can mask that it is only open to those who are prepared to be more practical than principled, to those who are prepared to "get on board." Pragmatism works by excluding those impractical radicals who want rapid change—especially change that dethrones those with existing privilege and change that demands reparations for the disenfranchisements that sustained this privilege.

If the politics of the everyday that Manzini explains in this book relies on pragmatism to construct a wider context for design—especially design for social innovation—then it is a form of politics that has been defanged of any agonism and so revolution. It is not the automated fantasies of techno-libertarianism, nor the easy life of the cynically apathetic. Manzini's book usefully describes the hard work involved in facilitating workshops to establish durable collaborations that will sustain better qualities of life for the participants, and he does so in ways that make it seem desirable. But what results is precisely, as Manzini describes his own moments of European village happiness, "a new contemporary form of community… that exists by choice, one that has been consciously or unconsciously designed and built… [as] voluntary, light, open communities, in which the individuality of each member is balanced with the desire to do something together" (2). All these pleasant qualities depend on the end of structural racisms and oppressive inequalities. These communities are open to underprivileged participants only so long as these participants are still willing and able collaborators, untraumatized by colonialism; and they also are open to privileged participants only if these participants remain untraumatized by much-needed decolonizations, such as large-scale sacrifices on behalf of more equitable resource redistribution. This way of seeing the political possibilities that design can afford seems to me so very quickly undercut by the arrival of social media- and tribe-backed leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro and their support of white supremacy—but also by the climate emergency.

As mentioned, Manzini is in this latest book more frank about the context from which he writes:

> I cannot continue my reflections referring to every possible social form to be found in the world. So I will limit the field to those that exist in the fluid, connected world I started with. I know very well that this condition is not valid for everybody and certainly not for everybody in the same way, but it is the only choice I can make: …I cannot move outside the point of view and action in which I find myself living (19).

This move feels disingenuous to me, partly because the widely traveled Manzini has had global experience and influence. It also feels disingenuous because robust accounts of design politics now exist outside of this field—accounts with which Manzini could have engaged if he had chosen to do so. For example, Arturo Escobar and the Decolonising Design group are those accounts most directly related to Manzini's work.

Manzini is admitting partiality, but in a way that does not, it feels to me, adequately take responsibility for that partiality. More problematic is the way this mild European parochialism downplays a crucial aspect of how designing is always already political, reducing this book to an account of the politics of a designer rather than a stronger articulation of design-based politics. Designers make decisions on behalf of other people and then materialize these decisions for these people's futures—and even the futures of others who come after them. Design is unavoidably an act of imposition. Co-designing is quite the fashion these days, but these designing-with approaches tend to suit digital service systems—in other words, more immaterial things and so more or less reversible things. The process of turning matters of concern into matters of fact is still an expert craft, done at best after consultation. This observation means that the politics of design cannot hope to remain only in the pragmatics of collaboration. Designers can and do have power to act on behalf of others who are not able to participate in current communities. Thus, designers must learn to authorize themselves to use these expert powers, given our exceptional states of emergency.

The book was more about the politics that are only the setting for all the social design practice that Manzini has done the most to mature over the past few decades; thus, as Manzini notes at its close, the book does not answer the question: "What is the role of design experts in building a collective design intelligence, one that cultivates diversity and critical sense to catalyze the necessary positive resources required to take us out of the environmental, social, and cultural catastrophe we are falling into?" (128). He promises that answering this question will be the focus of his next book.