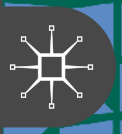

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Design Thinking and the New Spirit of Capitalism

Sociological Reflections on Innovation Culture

Tim Seitz

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Preface

Two years have passed since my book *Design Thinking und der neue Geist des Kapitalismus* was published in Germany. Since then, I have joined the "Innovation Society Today" research training group at the Technical University (TU) of Berlin, and this institutional move has greatly impacted my recent thoughts about the topic. It is within the intellectual context of my colloquium at the TU that I have been able to oversee the translation of the book into English, and I want to share some thoughts about what has oriented my thinking during this process.

As a sociologist, design thinking strikes me as a particularly rich "strategic research site"—borrowing from Robert K. Merton's terminology—and I was interested to see what we can learn about the society we inhabit by examining design thinking closely. My assumption has been that many peculiarities of our present moment are concretized and legible in design thinking, wherein our world becomes visible as an "innovation society"—and where the solution to any sort of problem is simply "more innovation."

How did we get here? As Benoît Godin has pointed out, until the beginning of modernity, innovation was considered a threat to the existing social order and understood pejoratively. Only after our pre-modern static societal order became dynamic did innovation gain its positive connotation. Modern societies stabilize through change, and innovation is a central driver of this process. We—as modern subjects—are subordinated to a systemic imperative to innovate, and design thinking's success becomes comprehensible in light of this imperative. In design thinking, creating innovation seems simple and intuitive: one merely needs to follow the appropriate method and complete the appropriate steps in a process.

My book's contribution to the field has been to consider design thinking ethnographically and to show how the innovation imperative unfolds in practice.

A central argument of the innovation society-thesis is that innovation becomes reflexive. While we can find innovations throughout human history, to make innovation the explicit goal of one's actions is a rather recent phenomenon. Design thinking's sole purpose is the generation of innovation, the production of new solutions to problems. Innovation becomes an end in itself, and one can see how design thinking must contend with several conflicts that arise therein. On the one hand, there is the problem with newness. Can design thinking's output always be understood as new when one knows from the beginning of the process that something new must emerge? In the book, I will discuss moments when it seemed to me that my informants had to struggle to name something new in order to keep design thinking's promise alive. This is also related to the question of urgency. The motto of the school of design thinking in Potsdam is "Don't wait. Innovate!" But how can one sustain this sense of urgency over time? And what does it mean to be constantly hurrying? It will become clear throughout the book that urgency is built into design thinking's architecture, and it is necessary to constantly work to maintain it. Lastly, there is the question of deviance. Design thinking promises to unleash human creativity by creating an atmosphere in which creative expression, deviance, and "wild ideas" are encouraged. But what does it mean to establish "deviance" as normative? I will discuss instances in which design thinking participants complied with the process by "deviating," and obviously, this had a quite conventional feel to it.

In innovation society, the imperative to innovate is not restricted to the commercial sphere. It reaches into politics, art, education, and really every part of society. We can observe, too, that design thinking spreads into these realms as well. One can find design thinkers facilitating workshops in elementary schools, universities, and art schools as well as in public administration and politics. There are also initiatives that apply design thinking to social problems, and an informant once talked to me about his idea to develop a design thinking workshop on capitalism itself. All of this has consequences. A mode of thinking that originated in product design moves to areas that function according to different logics. To fulfill its promise as a universal problem solver, design thinking must describe any problem as solvable by a product, service, or process. Other fields must be

adapted to design thinking's problem-solving ethos that focuses on symptoms rather than causes. This evidences design thinking's inherent blindness toward structures and, I would argue, reduces the horizon of social possibility, while conforming to the objectives of corporate product development and marketing.

So what can we do? Is there a way out? As one might expect from a sociologist, I am not offering direct answers here. I see no easy way of repairing design thinking, but dealing with the topic allows us to touch upon some of the fundamental problems of innovation society and maybe modernity as a whole. Furthermore, resisting the innovation imperative cannot simply mean refusing innovation altogether. As Bruno Latour has recently noted, we cannot escape modernity by simply reversing the modern telos and returning to imagined ways of old.

In response to design thinking's demand—"Don't wait. Innovate!"—I would offer that we ignore the initial imperative, that we in fact pause and reflect on what alternatives might be imaginable. Design thinking's hunger for quick solutions is accompanied by a modern epistemic habit of distancing, separating, ordering, and cleansing. Design thinking fixes problems in a double sense: fixing as in repairing, but also in the sense of af-fixing, or pinning down. What would a problem-solving approach look like that acknowledges that problems are not clear-cut entities but a web of relations and competing interests between humans and non-humans? This asks for an approach that is not afraid of complexity and confusion, and one that is willing to stay with the trouble, as Donna Haraway encourages.

This study was originally written as a master's thesis in the field of Science Studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin. In 2016, the German Sociological Association awarded it a prize for outstanding thesis. I revised the manuscript again for publication and I am now curious to watch the book's trajectory in the English-speaking world. This project would have been impossible without having observed design thinking in the first place, and for that I thank all the people in the field who received me with openness and curiosity, and who let me take part in their work. I would like to thank the many people who assisted me as this project developed: Johanna Block, Tim Flink, Susanne Förster, Anna Hipp, Sebastian Kramming, Lisa Kressin, Mareike Lisker, Felix Niggemann, Claudia Pilarski, Anika Redmann, Bente Sachs, Anita Šehagić and Carolin Thiem. Special thanks to Professor Dr. Martin Reinhart and Professor Dr. Tanja Bogusz, who advised me while I completed my study and who taught me how to do

research by acting as if I already could. I am indebted to the members of the DFG-research training group "Innovation Society Today," with whom I have had ongoing conversations about what it means to exist within an innovation society. I am deeply thankful to Lisa Cerami for her careful translation. It was a wonderful experience to collaborate with her in this endeavor and to get to know the book through her interpretations.

Berlin, Germany Tim Seitz
August 2019

Translator's Note

It has been a joy to translate Tim Seitz's *Design Thinking and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, and one aspect of the English version deserves to be highlighted—especially insofar as it seems to intersect with an original query by Seitz. In the German book, it was impossible for me to overlook how many citations, gathered in interviews, shadowing and participant observation, stood originally in English. Seitz and I decided that it would be too unwieldy to mark each utterance, and so the translation to a large extent erases these language markers. In some places, though the citations emerge in a slightly different vernacular than my own, they remain legible in grammar and syntax—but the distinctiveness that is readily caught in the German text is more or less obscured.

Upon further reflection, it is not merely the linguistic conditions of workshops and trainings—led in many cases by German speakers and for German speakers, but in English—that might be noted. It is also important to consider that the design thinking's material dimension often manifests in English. In Chap. 2, where Seitz investigates the materiality of design thinking, he notes that in preparing a design thinking workshop, the modular spaces are decorated with inspirational posters that proclaim the imperatives of the field: Build on the Ideas of others! Defer Judgement, Go for Quantity! Be Visual! Encourage Wild Ideas. The material tools of the trade, like the Time Timer, the conceptual tools that discipline the design thinker, like the deadline, have names derived from the English language but which take on meanings that are particular to design thinking itself. Design thinking—the field, discipline, praxis, and industry—is so named that I have long pondered on the odd nature of that title. These

are obviously English words, and design thinking is called design thinking in Stanford, Potsdam, and most likely the world over. And yet, it is a peculiar use of the gerund that makes design thinking seem like a roughly translated and dissected German compound.

A primary (English language) text that informs both the field and praxis of design thinking is Tim Brown's 2009 book *Change by Design*. Seitz's text draws heavily on Brown's book, which, as Seitz describes, in part inspired some of the questions that animate *Design Thinking and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In the course of translation, I was often struck by Brown's language. I found myself frustrated in many places by the slippage I noticed between my own English language renderings and Brown's text. I came to the conclusion that the language of design thinking, its discursive vernacular, is particular unto itself. It derives from English, and some of its practices and materials have English language makers, but it is adapted to the conditions of the industry, and becomes something of its own language.

It is also worth mentioning that this language is not grounded by communicating meaning, but communicating communicability. As Seitz will contend, design thinking's factual dimension is often subordinated to its temporal and social dimensions, to the end of facilitating output that would otherwise be hindered or delayed by reflection or critique. To that end, English, as the language of markets and, one might add, global capitalism, serves very well as a conduit for the spontaneous and intuitive production of market solutions that escape meaningful critique.

How the linguistic-communicative conditions of design thinking relate to the demands of the spirit of capitalism would be another book unto itself, but hopefully this note might bring attention to these questions that are concrete in Seitz's original German book but are masked in translation.

—Lisa Cerami, *Visiting Assistant Professor in German, University of Rochester, USA*

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