

Design as a Political Activity

Borrowing from Classical Political Theories

Insights

- Viewing design as a political activity is not new, but discussions about the political aspects of design have been vague.
- Classical political theories strongly support claims that design is a political activity.
- Looking at design through the lenses of classical political theories reveals an interesting and complex set of political situations.

Several design scholars have suggested that design is a political activity. Jonas Löwgren and Erik Stolterman, for instance, claimed that all designs are manifestations of political and ideological ideas because design outcomes influence our lives [1]. Björn Franke argued that a design is a political decision about how people should live, communicate, or behave (see www.designaspolitics.com). Franke also maintained that we could view politics as a form of design because it involves planning, making decisions, and creating laws. And Michael Bierut argued in similar terms about graphic design: “Much, if not most, graphic design is about communicating messages, and many of these messages are intended to persuade. This places its practice clearly in the realm of politics” [2].

Discussions about the political aspects of design are not new; however, most of these discussions have been vague. Calling design a political activity because it influences the lives of people does not say much—almost everything we do directly or indirectly influences others. And calling politics a form of design does not help clarify the distinctions between these two terms. With such broad and vague discussions, we risk inflating the already loaded terms *design* and *politics*, making constructive discussions about them difficult, if not impossible.

With this article I want to support ongoing discussions about the political aspects of design by exploring the meaning of the word *politics* more deeply. I base my exploration on James Alexander’s recent analysis of



First female candidate for U.S. President addressing Congress in 1872.

definitions of politics in five classical political theories [3]. I will argue that classical political theories provide strong, concrete support for claims that design is a political activity. Moreover, looking at design through the lenses of classical political theories reveals interesting and complex sets of political situations.

CLASSICAL POLITICAL THEORIES

Politics is a widely used and loaded term. Alexander found that many influential political theories contradict one another in their definitions of politics [3]. He noted, however, that these theories do have several common characteristics and that each theory sheds a different light on the meaning of the word. Here, I review these common

characteristics and briefly present five classical political theories that Alexander attempted to generalize.

A central theme in definitions of politics is a rule, a common standard that regulates some aspect of human lives. Politics is normally defined as an activity through which people make, preserve, and change the general rules under which they live [3].

Political theorists do not view politics as being identical to rules or as a simple execution of the rules. Rather, politics is an activity related to the *introduction* or *changes* of rules in situations where there is a division of people in two classes:

- the rulers, a group of people who have (formal or informal) powers to define the rules that other people need to follow, and

- the ruled, a group of people who are (formally or informally) following the rules defined by rulers.

Political theorists generally agree that in politics the ruled are not simply passive followers of rules; the ruled have the opportunity to influence, actively change, or disrupt the rules.

Robin George Collingwood defined politics as the science of “rightness or conformity to rule” [4]. According to Collingwood, political action is “the making and obeying the laws . . . regulation, control, the imposition of order and regularity upon things” [4]. Through politics, rulers and ruled are attempting to meet shared standards so that order can be achieved. For Collingwood, politics is related to any activity associated with rules (the view that I share in this article):

The rules of any corporation, the statutes of a company, the regulations of a club, the routine of a family, are all political facts, and no less political are the rules which a man makes for his own guidance, and revises [them] from time to time as occasion demands [4].

To be political, Collingwood stated, an activity has to satisfy three “laws of politics” [5]:

- People involved in an activity are divided into a ruling class and a ruled class.
- The barrier between the two classes is permeable in an upward sense (i.e., the ruled can become the rulers).
- There is a correspondence between the rulers and ruled.

Michael Oakeshott argued that politics happens when persons without authority (i.e., the ruled) can approve or disapprove of rules, or offer their opinions about the need to change or not change these rules [6]. In Oakeshott’s view, in a political activity the ruled respond to attempts by the rulers to lay down common standards. The rulers propose common standards, and the ruled can express judgments about how these standards affect their interests.

Hannah Arendt viewed persuasion as one of the most important elements of politics. To be political, says Arendt, means that everything is decided “through words and persuasion and not through force and violence” [7]. In political situations, “men in their freedom can interact with one another . . . as equals among equals . . . managing all their affairs by speaking with and persuading one another” [8]. In Arendt’s view, to command (i.e., to rule) rather than to persuade involves pre-political ways of dealing with people, characteristic of life outside the political system.

Carl Schmitt maintained that a central element of a political activity is a decision [9]. Simply talking about rules does not make an activity political. An activity may be called political only to the extent that it crystallizes in a decision. According to Schmitt, in any political activity the rulers and ruled face the political imperative that a decision be made. How this decision is made is not a defining characteristic. Rather, what makes some activity political is the mere imperative that a decision is made. Schmitt also views politics in more negative terms, as nothing more

than party politics, where people take sides to reach desired decisions.

Last, Jacques Rancière sees politics as a revolt against the ruling according to established rules [10]. In his view, ruling is the activity of police, while politics is anything that disrupts this activity. Rancière defines *police order* as a set of implicit rules and conventions that determine the distribution of roles in a community. A police order defines rules and imposes constraints on what can be thought, made, or done in a particular context. Politics, in Rancière’s view, is an activity that challenges such police order and its rules.

Here, I only briefly sketched definitions of politics from classical political theories. For readers who want to explore this topic further, I recommend reading the work of the political theorists mentioned. I also recommend James Alexander’s article for a nice overview [3].

DESIGN AS A POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Classical political theories provide strong, concrete support for claims that design is a political activity. Politics revolves around the process of defining rules and common standards that regulate human activities, and design is always about defining some such rules and common standards. Löwgren and Stolterman, for example, claimed that every design constrains our space of possible actions by promoting the usage of certain skills and focusing on the creation of certain outcomes [1]. Similar to the Rancière’s view on the police order, each design imposes constraints on what can be thought, made, or done in a certain context.

What political theories add to current discussions about design and politics is the view that the mere existence of rules does make some activity political. Politics “happens” when rules can be introduced or changed based on the interaction between the rulers and the ruled. Consequently, we may say that design is a political activity because (and only when) design stakeholders can influence introduction and changes of design-related rules. Design professionals who do not allow others to influence such rules risk being perceived as dictators, as discussed in Alex Cabal’s blog post “The Cult Of Design Dictatorship”

(<https://alexcabal.com/the-cult-of-design-dictatorship/>).

Looking at design through the lenses of classical political theories reveals an interesting and complex set of political situations. One group of these situations is the interaction between design professionals and users. Different approaches to design promote different balances of power between design professionals and users. In user-centered design (UCD), for example, design professionals try to optimize a product around how users can, want, or need to use the product. Here, design professionals have most of the decision-making power, but users (or their representatives) are encouraged to provide feedback. Users can express their opinions and comments on proposed or implemented rules (e.g., through participatory design sessions, prototype and usability testing, or satisfactory surveys). In political terms, the rulers (design professionals) and the ruled (users) are attempting to agree on shared standards so that order can be achieved (as Collingwood suggests). Alternatively, we may view UCD as a political situation in which the rulers (design professionals) are attempting to define common standards and the ruled (users) respond to these attempts by making judgments about how these standards affect them (as Oakeshott suggests).

Co-design and participatory design promote more equal relations between design professionals and users (e.g., [11]). In these approaches, the goal of design professionals is not to make final design decisions. Rather, these approaches are empowering, encouraging, and guiding users to make these decisions for themselves. In political terms, these initiatives attempt to blur the distinction between the rulers and the ruled, making them “equals among equals,” as Arendt suggests.

We may also talk about “mass politics” as a form of interaction between design professionals and users. Various consumer product “revolutions” may be viewed as such. Users have often rejected existing products and begun using new ones perceived as better or more desirable (e.g., gesture-based vs. keyboard-based smartphones). Here, individual users do not have a direct influence on design decisions. However, they can accept or

reject competing products through their free choice in the market. In that way, they can indirectly stimulate companies to react and change their designs. In political terms, these situations may be viewed as revolts against established rules (as Rancière suggests). Such “mass politics” can also force other changes in design companies. In 2014, for example, a number of users boycotted the Firefox Web browser because of the CEO’s stance on gay rights. This boycott significantly contributed to the pressure that led to the CEO’s resignation.

Another set of political situations in design relates to the rules that regulate a design process. Design professionals and other stakeholders need to agree on a number of rules that coordinate their work. Defining a design process, deciding on a budget, setting priorities, negotiating deadlines, and selecting tools and materials are complex political activities with many stakeholders. Interactions between design professionals and clients are one example. On the one hand, clients define the terms and conditions of contracts and are responsible for providing financial and other support. On the other hand, clients depend on the expertise and ideas of design professionals. Design professionals are not mere executors of the client’s wishes, and they are expected to be innovative. But to get their ideas accepted, design professionals need to interact with clients and persuade them of the rightness of particular design choices. This aspect is nicely illustrated in an anecdote provided by Herbert Simon. Simon had asked Ludwig Mies van der Rohe how he got a client to sign off on a house that was radical for 1930. Mies apparently replied, “He wasn’t happy at first. But then we smoked some good cigars . . . and we drank some glasses of a good Rhine wine . . . and then he began to like it very much.”

This anecdote may be described as a political situation viewed in Arendt’s terms. Decisions are reached “through words and persuasion,” and people manage their affairs “by speaking with and persuading one another.”

In some cases, complex political interaction among design stakeholders may lead to negative consequences and “party politics.” A typical example is “design by committee.” Fred Brooks

argued that outcomes of a design by committee lack focus and result in impractical products with too broad functionality. Brooks elaborated that the people in committees, in order to protect their own interests, are often reluctant to reject any request:

Each player has a wish list garnered from his constituents and weighted by his personal experiences. Each has both an ego and a reputation that depend on how well he gets his list adopted. Logrolling is endemic—an inevitable consequence of the incentive structure. “I won’t naysay your wish, if you won’t naysay mine” [12].

The need of design professionals and other stakeholders to make decisions within limited timeframes further emphasizes the political aspect of design. All projects have deadlines. Design professionals often need to make a number of agreements and compromises to meet these deadlines. Even when a strict deadline is not imposed, the dynamics of the design process may put pressure on design professionals to make decisions quickly. Bryan Lawson, for example, noted that procrastination as a strategy in design is deeply flawed [13]. He elaborated that once a design problem has been identified, it is no longer possible to avoid making decisions about a design outcome: “In many real-life design situations it is actually not possible to take no action. The very process of avoiding or delaying a decision has an effect!” [13]. For example, if a new road is planned but the route remains under debate for any lengthy period, the property in the region will likely change in value. Here we have a typical Schmitt’s situation where the rulers and ruled face the political imperative that a decision be made.

CONCLUSION

Examples in the previous section are just some of the possible political situations in design. Design professionals may also be involved in other political situations, including:

- politics surrounding public policies, as illustrated by the long-running *Interactions forum* of the same name,
- workplace politics of organizations in which design professionals operate,
- politics of design educational institutions and funding agencies, and

- politics of professional organizations (such as ACM).

And the list could be extended even more. My goal is not to provide an elaborate rundown of all possible political situations in design. Rather, I want to illustrate that the space of political situations in design is broad and diverse.

Consequently, we need to be thoughtful about the political aspects of design. Politics is an unavoidable and essential part of design. With this article I wanted to show that studying classical political theories can provide insights about why design is a political activity. I hope to encourage design professionals, researchers, and students to explore this topic in more depth by themselves.

ENDNOTES

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