

Redesigning Money as a Tool for Self-Management in Cultural Production

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Money is a crucial mediation for organizing in capitalist societies. Those who lack money cannot easily organize and raise collective consciousness. A naive form of consciousness may reject money to prevent greed and envy. Nevertheless, a critical state of consciousness should perceive money as a tool that can be redesigned to encourage different feelings that can ballast anti-capitalist transactions. This research describes Colaborativa@PE, a collective who designed digital social currencies to nurture solidarity bonds in several cultural production collectives spread through Brazil. These collectives embarked on an inquiry that led them to experiment with solidarity economy and self-management. The need to digitize their self-management practices brought them to Corais Platform, a free software/design suite that adopts a participatory metadesign approach. Colaborativa@PE's members joined the platforms' metadesign and proposed a new social currency tool, soon implemented. With this new tool, the Colaborativa@PE's associated collectives greatly expanded their self-management handiness degree, becoming more critical of its possibilities and limitations for organizing. While analyzing this case, this research concludes that the redesign process can be characterized as a form of conscientization in light of Paulo Freire's and Álvaro Vieira Pinto's works.

solidarity economy; self-management; cultural production; conscientization

1. Introduction

Money plays a central role in mediating social relationships in capitalist societies. In itself, money is a social relationship: a form of credit within a particular society represented by a symbolic medium (Marx,

1993). Following contemporary trends of flexible accumulation of capital (Harvey, 1989), money's medium is turning digital through credit cards, digital bank accounts, blockchain, and other technologies prone to biases against local communities (Paraná, 2020). Such biases are thoroughly questioned by those interested in mediating anti or alter-capitalist social relationships. Digital money is not suited to solidarity economy and self-management approaches, pretty much based on local relationships.

This research describes a network of cultural producers who designed several digital social currencies to enable self-management and solidarity economy, challenging these misconceptions. In Brazil, money had become a precondition for action in cultural production in recent years (Campregher *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, these producers had to try something different, as government funding drastically reduced. Some cultural producers sided with large multinational organizations to finance their projects. However, these demanded that cultural producers adopt an entrepreneurial mindset and turn their creations into valuable cultural products and services, or their costs would not be paid for as agreed upon. Even if the literature on creative economy states that such association may boost productivity (Florida, 2004), in this case, it ends up severely restricting cultural producers' freedom of expression and self-determination.

Another group of cultural producers tried distributing their works over digital networks. Soon they realized that the capital extracted from local producers quickly overflows to the global economy and never returns to the locality. While distribution networks accumulate capital, artists receive small, barely enough fees to sustain their lives, adding little to the local culture that inspired and formed the artist. Creative economy literature suggests that cultural producers accumulate capital simultaneously, developing their distribution networks through platform cooperatives (Scholz, 2016). However, cultural producers are primarily interested in culture, not in accumulating financial capital per se. Many attempts — including designing things (Björgvinsson and Severson, 2014) — to organize cultural producers have failed due to conflicts around money distribution and management.

The cultural producers described in this case tried something different: designing their digital infrastructure based on self-management practices (Pelanda, 2019). That effort led them to explore solidarity economy, an alternative economic model adopted by several social movements in Brazil, including those who crave self-management (Singer, 2006). In a solidarity economy, capital is not averted but distributed among the local community participating in the economy through community banking systems and social currencies. Products and services that did not have much value in the globalized economy regain social value within a localized economy. The community is then shielded from capital flight, enabling self-management.

This paper describes the digitally-mediated self-management practices of one of these cultural producers: Colaborativa@PE. This producer was chosen because they were pioneers in developing a working model and subsequently trained or influenced dozens of collaborative cultural producers across Brazil.

2. The Colaborativa@PE cultural producer

Cultural producers have organized solidarity economy circuits in Brazil since 2005 (Campregher *et al.*, 2016); however, they did not use advanced digital infrastructures. Colaborativa@PE is a collective of students, artists, journalists, photographers, video makers, and technicians who grew out of the cultural points national program (Jatobá, 2014). Colaborativa@PE is organized and managed by Instituto Intercidadania and other groups at Recife (Pernambuco, Brazil). The organization developed a social technology called collaborative cultural producer (Jatobá, 2015), a collection of methods and technologies to start local social businesses in Lan houses, info centers, or public facilities. The methods available in this social technology include technology education, multimedia archive, local media, accounting, media production, internal organization, and social credit.

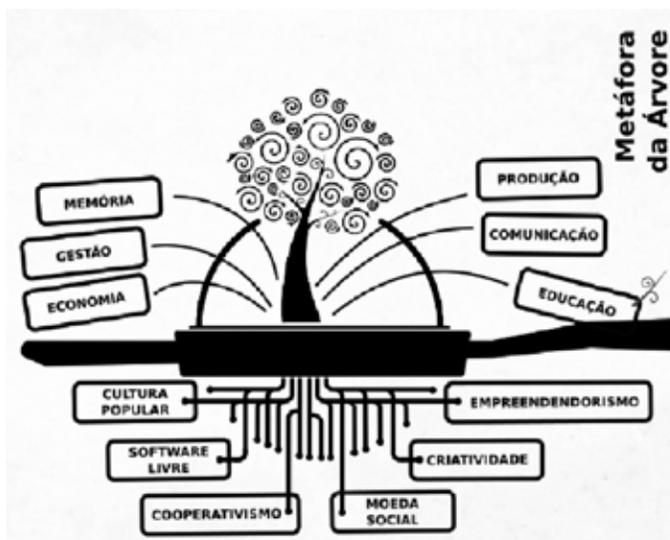


Figure 1 – Colaborativa@PE cultural producing activities.

From 2010 to 2011, the producers organized events and charged the featured artists in the complementary currency, which could be paid by doing some tasks for the event's organization or by giving the creations (mainly music CDs) to the organizers (Jatobá, 2014). The audience could purchase services and goods in social currency, but that meant having to organize future events. The local community received these economic relationships quite well, but managing all these transactions became a heavy task for the organizers.

After critically reflecting on their situation, the producer decided to expand their collective handiness.¹ to increase self-management. The infrastructural design (Pelanda, 2019) advanced further than solidarity economy and reached free software, seeking financial and technological freedom. In 2012, Colaborativa@PE docked at Corais Platform (Van Amstel *et al.*, 2014; Van Amstel and Gonzatto, 2016), a web-based platform with integrated collaborative tools built on Drupal framework, a free software framework that allows for real-time multi-user text editing, task management, blog, and mind maps.²

The producer initially wanted to improve their social currencies using the platform's radical openness to strengthen their transparency among their peers and business partners (Jatobá, 2014). They first tried to run their solidarity economy using the platform's online spreadsheet feature. They uploaded the open price list with their demands and offers, and the transaction logs. All the information became publicly accessible to anyone surfing the web. Yet they faced several limitations with the spreadsheets. They contacted the platform developers and joined the platform Metadesign Project, which aimed at redesigning the platform with the platform itself (Pelanda, 2019). In this project, they proposed a new

¹ Handiness concerns the space of possible projects of people in your local reality (Vieira Pinto, 1960). It is the way a person or social group can act, using the artifacts around them. A handiness can be more or less elaborated, depending on people's reality's social and cultural conditions. The development of collective handiness takes place through the transformation of the artifacts. The accumulation of work allows new artifacts that can lead to more useful and humane ways of acting and being in the world (Gonzatto and Merkle, 2016).

² Corais Platform "was launched in 2011 by Faber-Ludens Institute for Interaction Design. [...] Corais was developed to encourage design livre in other institutions, not necessarily connected to Faber-Ludens. [...] Corais was meant to be the "Github of design", in analogy to the popular collaborative computer programming platform. [...] Instead of defining a code and imposing on hosted projects, Corais offered infrastructure for every project to define its own "code" to share gradually. It was expected that the diverse contributions in the project would follow a certain design code at some point, even if ill-structured and tacit." (Van Amstel *et al.*, 2014, p.1-2). Corais Platform is available at www.corais.org

social currency tool, which the developers took. A close dialogue started between the cultural producers sharing their expertise in solidarity economy and the developers sharing technical expertise in interaction design and free software module customization.

The tool design did not follow a traditional process of sketching, documenting, and prototyping interactions, as it is common in interaction design aimed at proprietary software or hardware (Löwgren & Stolterman, 2004). The tool was plugged right away into the running platform, and the code was tweaked many times as the cultural producers used it. After some weeks of tweaking, the new tool achieved a sound design, and the cultural producers used it smoothly.

Among the many economic ideas that became possible after developing the online social credit tool, the bike radio is tantamount. Colaborativa@PE put a battery-powered sound system on a bike and rode it across the university campus. The sound system played a 30-minute show produced by them, with local music and local ads. The exciting part is that this advertising could only be purchased in social credits. A neighbor's vegetarian restaurant and a grocery store purchased ads to support the show and the local economy circuit. The students could now pay for food using the social credit acquired from working for Colaborativa@PE. The advertisers got so excited about the exchange that they even hired some students to design other kinds of media, all paid in social currency.

A couple of months later, Universidade Livre do Teatro Vila Velha, another cultural producer from Salvador city, hired Colaborativa@PE as a consultant. This school was struggling with governmental budget cuts and had the idea of charging their students using the social currency — students would have to conduct maintenance and administrative tasks to pay for their studies. They had education technology activities, offered outreach courses, cultural events (like music festivals), debates, and food (with some local businesses that worked with lunch and fast food). All of these organizations accepted social credit in exchange for their services. In turn, with that credit, they could buy other services available in the local economy created by Universidade Livre.

The currency was designed openly among the students, including a face-to-face circular discussion and an online vote for the currency's name. From 2012 to 2014, the currency mediated more than 3.100 transactions among the 63 school members (Figure 2). The currency strengthened the student's bonds to the school, making them feel part of a vibrant community. In a few years, the theatre went from an almost state of bankruptcy to a nationally recognized center, having their student dramaturgies presented in many parts of the country.

After designing several solidarity economy circuits, Colaborativa@PE realized that for the social currency to work, a territorial pact between the circuit members was necessary. People needed to believe that the credit had real value. The backing of this social currency needed to be based on the concrete existence of a network between products and services. In most solidarity economy circuits, the social currency can be exchanged for official money — Reals as in Brazil; however, the cultural producers decided that their currencies could not convert to standard money. In this way, nobody could join the economic circuit without working for the community first. For example, if a new member wanted to purchase a service, they needed to acquire the necessary credit within this economic circuit. The social currency is not as hard to acquire as official money, allowing each participant to choose which cultural needs are most important in a particular moment.

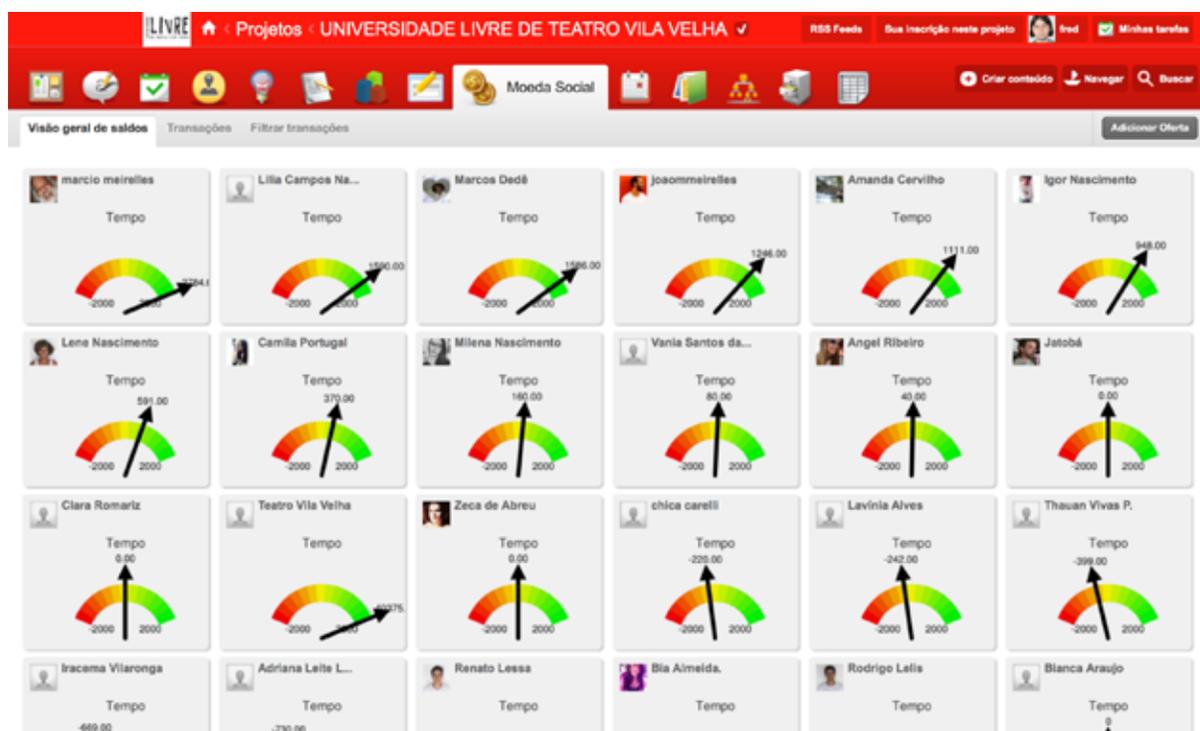


Figure 2: Social credit health overview in Corais Platform as used by Universidade Livre de Teatro Vila Velha. The meters display how much debt or credit an individual has in that economic circuit.

The main challenge at the beginning of a solidarity economy circuit is to convince the local community to leverage their territory. Doing the groundwork was key to collaborative cultural producers, articulating human relations among the economic partners. They had several dialogues to convince members that this was not a scam, that the circuit would work, and that people could offer. In other words, recognizing that the territory has an abundance of services and products available, despite the disinterest of capitalist economic circuits. In this sense, Colaborativ@PE exemplifies the importance of creating community moments and strengthening solidarity bonds. Moments of catharsis, of community empowerment, of recognition of the potential for work, such as when, in meetings, participants can say what they know how to do, are equally important for economic health.

In collaborative cultural producers, being a self-managed enterprise means that all management is done individually and collectively through shared leadership (Noronha *et al.*, 2018). Every task is self-managed by the person who executes it and the collective who provides the resources for execution. For example, the artists who joined the producer participate in cultural production and decide their collectively agreed norms in their territory as entrepreneurs. This process helps to agree on the network's credibility; everyone trusts and follows these rules. The transparent management of currencies in the Corais Platform is essential to make this pact. It is not about imposing a social bank: people participate in their design and are responsible for its consequences.

3. Conscientization and the production for the self

The redesign of money in Brazilian collaborative cultural producers cannot be fully understood without considering the role of conscientization or critical collective consciousness development, a process described first by Álvaro Vieira Pinto (1960) and second by Paulo Freire (1996). Vieira Pinto refers to consciousness as human beings, referring to both the individual and social groups (collective consciousness). For Vieira Pinto, the human being is a being that needs to produce its existence. As human beings, we are our consciousness because we need our minds, bodies, and tools to act in the

space around us. We are also our circumstances, our handiness, the relationships we developed with the artifacts around us.

The only way to qualitatively transform social existence (what a human being is) is by transforming the world around us. Redesigning objects, technologies, and structures lead to new possibilities for action, and therefore new ways of being in the world (Vieira Pinto, 2015). Vieira Pinto theorizes what could be called a critical flavor of ontological design (Willis, 2006), guided by a dialectical-existential perspective (Gonzatto, 2018; Van Amstel and Gonzatto, 2021).

As conscience is defined by its link with the world, with reality, Vieira Pinto (1960) investigated this issue and found two significant conscience modalities: critical conscience and naive conscience. These are not just opposing consciousnesses but a continuum between one and the other. However, its extremes can be distinguished for didactic purposes: critical consciousness is the relationship mode in which consciousness of the factors and conditions (objectives) determine reality. Even recognizing that reality is changeable, it seeks within it the relationships that shape the existence of human beings, and therefore, it also acts in reality to transform these conditions. The naive conscience, on the contrary, characterizes the conscience that is detached from its surrounding reality, unconditioned, or independent, rarely considering social transformation as possible from that vantage point.

According to Vieira Pinto, the formation of a critical conscience comes from collectively working for the self with and from the available handiness (Gonzatto and Merkle, 2016). In the case described, the workforce was observed as an abundant and necessary resource locally but alienated. People's work was either not required because the forms of a requisition in capitalism pass through a commodity form, or it did not return to the local economy. With social currencies, people began to realize that they could be entrepreneurs in their areas of expertise.

So, in this case, money redesign can be characterized as a process of conscientization (Freire, 1996), not just for its design, but because it was accompanied by: a) a critique of the oppressive reality, the social, technological, cultural and ideological relations; and b) the collective action of transforming this reality using more elaborate forms found in handiness. We can understand from the Colaborativa@PE case that the production of existence is enmeshed with the production of artifacts and, therefore, the design of the social money tool cannot be separated from the design of the social relationships mediated by it. When the cultural producers realized that they could redesign these social relationships by redesigning money, they enabled many economic transactions that would not be possible within a capitalist economy.

For example, the designer who worked for the vegetarian restaurant was unemployed at that time. He used his free time to create advertising posters and was paid with social currency, with which he could pay for lunch in that same restaurant for two months. In the conditions in which they found themselves, the restaurant did not perceive it as an investment opportunity to pay for posters, but in being able to offer their meals (in exchange for social currency), as an opportunity that cost little and that could have an impact in their territory. This transaction was beneficial for both. This transaction is not a simple barter because it is not an approximate exchange between two individuals but paid work within a network. Above all, the transaction was beneficial for the territory, which increased its offerings and possibilities for action.

In capitalist economic circuits, the subsistence of its members is not a goal but a means for wealth development. In a solidarity economy, subsistence is the goal, often expressed with the concepts like *Buen-Vivir* (Acosta, 2013). In the action of Collaborative.PE, it can be observed that, in a short time, the participants had access to food and work without depending on the traditional means recommended by the capitalist bias of the creative economy. This perception is felt by the people involved: they notice the result quickly. They realize their territory's abundance: people and their handiness.

From a perspective of naive conscience (Vieira Pinto, 1960), a territory could be seen as poor, with scarce resources. Nevertheless, by increasing the consciousness for the work available in the territory, it is possible to reach a transitory form of consciousness. First, the perception of the abundance of available labor, then the transformative action in this reality to make this work for the self, for the collective body that constitutes the community. This transition would be impossible to be done by just one isolated individual.

In this way, social currencies appear as a pedagogical concept, not only economical (Jatobá, 2015). Monetary exchanges can be made regardless of people's need for survival. In the cultural producers' network, people engage directly and begin to perceive value and look for opportunities in local activities. Entrepreneurs are beginning to recognize themselves as people with something to offer and who can be recognized and paid for. The described transformation would be impossible to be done by just one isolated individual.

In the creative economy based on international capital, each individual is faced with a large and complex one, which produces alienation by distancing people, territory, and products of labor. The product appears before the worker, and both are detached from the territory. Likewise, the infrastructure technology needed for economic transactions is presented as "natural," as if there were no alternatives (such as the solidarity economy).

4. The viable unheard-of digital solidarity money

We understand that the creation of cultural currencies by Colaborativa@PE cultural producers is an example of creating alternative forms of social relationships at the margins of capitalism. The cultural producers were oppressed in the class struggle endorsed by the creative economy, but they refused to accept that condition in a naive consciousness.

Vieira Pinto (1960; 2005) and Paulo Freire (1996) explain that the experience of oppression brings the oppressed closer to reality, as it poses the urgent need to build alternatives and transform that limit-situation. Initially, the oppressed may take the oppressor (and the oppressive structure) as their humanization model. For example, any artist can supposedly grow out of poverty in the creative economy and become a global entrepreneur that oppresses other artists. In a solidarity economy, artists gradually realize that humanization comes from the *viable unheard of* (Freire, 1996), with a new mode of being that overcomes the oppression. This new mode of being is usually already present within the handiness, not yet recognized, unheard of, but still viable.

We understand that participating in the design of their own technology helps recognize this condition as underdeveloped and release the *viable unheard-of*. Through technological production and modification, the limits of reality are presented. For example, it would be easier to use a Google Drive platform in their handiness. However, Google tools are not suitable for a self-management perspective. There would be a relationship of dependence that did not interest collaborative cultural producers. More than that, it would not be possible to adapt it to the specifics of their needs. Also, recognizing limit-situation is a critical conscientization step, in which is the perception that the local reality and its technologies are the ones that need to be improved, not only the foreign technology. For example, many transactions with social currencies are not possible due to the lack of a resource such as an app, which allows them to be carried out through smartphones (not just desktop computers). This technical relationship becomes a new idea to improve the work for the self continuously. Self-management is indeed management work for the self, not for the capitalist other who employs management to improve work exploitation and profit-making.

The design of the infrastructure of this network, instead of having profit as its center (through the exploitation of workers, which produces added value), had solidarity outcomes. Understanding and participating in the solidarity economy processes shows a progressive understanding that it is about

helping and recognizing work and other people through self-management. It was turning visible the people's existing work and the abundance of work available by these people.

We think that participation in the development of technology itself makes the cybernetic cycle of production of existence shorter. Technologies are not neutral (Vieira Pinto, 2005; Gonzatto and Van Amstel, 2017). When using technology from a global company, you need to wait weeks or months for updates, which does not always correspond to the community's interests (since the company has its own interests). Mastering the local technique allows for another type of iteration. That was how the direct contact between cultural producers and developers of the Corais.org platform emerged to create the functionality of digital currencies (Van Amstel *et al.*, 2014). A remarkable solidarity outcome comes from the widespread dissemination of anthropophagic practices across several collaborative projects (Van Amstel, 2020).

5. Final remarks

This research describes Colaborativa@PE, a collective that designed digital social currency to nurture solidarity bounds in several cultural production collectives spread throughout Brazil. It is a case of production of existence: through resuming work, which is abundant in the territory, converting from work to another, to become work for the self. This case is also an example of a conscientization process through projects, in this case, money redesign.

This research is yet another example that design research can learn from the experiences of the South of resistance from communities in the face of unequal distribution of resources and technologies. In the case here described, cultural producers developed their handiness to improve their social productions of existence — not despite, but from their underdeveloped conditions.

This research sought new meanings and ways of being in a world where the creative economy presents as an unavoidable standard for cultural production, mainly concerned with the global economic dimension but oblivious to local development possibilities. Using the resources already available at hand led Colaborativa@PE to a critical point of the conscientization process. Working with our reality led to the recognition of the possibilities and the limitations of the organization forms. Moreover, this led to a critical conscientization of the material conditions needed but already available for self-management.

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