

# Solidarity as a Principle for Antisystemic Design Processes: Two cases of alliance with social struggles in Brazil

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In this essay we reflect on the possibility of politicizing participatory design processes by defending the notion of solidarity in Paulo Freire's thought. We present a critique of empathy as a relational practice in design, considering it to be an anti-dialogical practice that reifies subjects in design processes focused on developing capitalist commodities. As a counterpoint, we defend solidarity as a dialogical ethical principle and practice that is founded on consciousness and the inviolent and transformation of given reality (of oppression). To support our argument, we present two experiences where we live solidarity-in-praxis while promoting design engagements in Brazil. The first is a designer alliance with a collective of peripheral youngsters at the Terra Firme neighbourhood in Belém, Pará, in the northern part of Brazil. The other is an alliance with a national-wide popular education initiative that works with women's political education in Brazil within the feminist movement. In experiencing these, we borrow Freire's suggestion and argue for solidarity, as opposed to empathy, to build antisystemic design processes.

*empathy; solidarity; Paulo Freire; design engagements in Brazil*

## 1. Introduction

In this essay we outline theoretical paths and strategies to address the depoliticization of projectual processes in design and claim the notion of solidarity in Freire (1967; 2015) as a basis for a design with an antisystemic perspective.

In the first part, we present a critique of empathy as a relational practice in design projects. We recognize empathy as a very narrow notion, which delimits the designer's relationship with users to the conditions of commodity development. In this process, the designer has the task of accessing users' emotions, revealing their desires through products and services. Endowed with exclusive agency in this process, the designer acts as subject while the other participants, users, are reified and their historical, political, and social context is placed in the abstract for design purposes.

In counterpoint, we defend the notion of solidarity as an ethical principle that should guide engaged and politicized design processes. We understand solidarity as an action of political responsibility towards the critical recognition of oppressions and the overcoming of the oppressed-oppressor contradiction.

The praxis based on solidarity proposes to the designer a process of self-transformation by real engagement in the dialectical contradiction, posed by his or her position both in the design process and in the ordering of systems of oppression. This demystifies the uniqueness of creative designer subject and the solutionist perspective and, at the same time, enunciates the possibility of critical awareness about structural issues that define the need to generate a new product, service or any design solution.

Finally, we introduce two experiences of solidarity-in-práxis that bring concreteness to our arguments. The first is a designer alliance with the Terra Firme collective in Belém, Pará, in the northern part of Brazil and the other experience is an alliance with Universidade Livre Feminista, a popular education network within the feminist movement in Brazil.

## 2. Empathy in the design process

The notion of "empathy" has gained ground in design discussions since the formulation of Human Centered Design (HCD), and has projected itself as the essential skill of designer thinkers linked to innovation consultancies (Brown, 2010). In these approaches, empathy is recognized as the ability to put oneself in the other person's shoes and supposedly leads the individual to understand the world as the other person does. Dandavate, Sanders, and Stuart (1996) understand that empathy is related to the ability to understand and experience feelings, thoughts, and experiences even if they are not explicitly communicated. The authors believe that this ability is necessary to the designer because the recognition and response to these feelings would be, in this perspective, determinant for the success of products, since they allow the designer to anticipate solutions according to subjectively expressed needs. This competence, then, would allow the designer to design desirable solutions and meet the users' needs through new products or services.

For a HCD or Design Thinking process to be conducted, it makes use of previously developed design tools that supposedly allow the user to express himself or herself in a more rational or emotional way, according to the specificities of each toolkit. It is possible to notice that, in these approaches, the emotional factors of users or consumers are understood as the great "mystery" to be unraveled by designers and planners engaged in product or service development. The notion of empathy, in this way, is restricted to merely speculative and commercial objectives, even though the insertion of users gives the tools a consultative and, sometimes, participative character.

In this context, the designer's experience of empathy with users starts from a delimitation given by the product or service to be designed, that is, it is restricted to the specific conditions of the commodity. The empathy supposedly practiced by the designer is only able to unravel such mysteries in the relationship of the commodity with the user and in the exclusive environment of this encounter. Consequently, this experience reduces the understanding of a problem situation as a design opportunity, which, depending

on the given reality, leads to the abstraction of the concrete situation of oppression for design purposes, erasing significant issues that qualify the complexity of the investigated historical-political-social context.

The issue becomes even more tense when we understand that this empathic relationship, in fact, places all power of action (agency) in the designer, who guides the development of the commodity from his or her own perceptions, often claiming a "technical" profile influenced by access "to the deepest levels of user expression" (Sanders, 2002) to make the best possible decisions on that matter.

In design processes that have the notion of empathy as a principle, the unequal power relations between designer and researched subjects, who are reified, are strengthened and amplified to the extent that the designer defines what serves or not as a solution to a design problem identified by the designer himself or herself in a much broader and more complex situation (of oppression). Empathy in design processes, therefore, can be associated with the objectification and dehumanization of subjects, having the development of the commodity as its only interest.

### **3. Solidarity as a principle for antisystemic design practices**

The critical approach to reality, which in Freire (1967; 2005) is part of the process of conscientization, can be a key moment to think of the design process as a process allied to the struggle of the oppressed. Freire (2005) highlights the importance of the educational process being forged with the oppressed, and not for the oppressed. In the same way, we defend design processes that are entangled in the collective unveiling of reality, where everyone understands themselves as political subjects, and where there is not one social group at the service or subjugated to another. This humanization allows the overcoming of the objectification promoted by the capitalist consumer culture, which hides the structural oppressions in order to "solve" its symptoms through products. The designers, aware of such relationships, position themselves on the side of the oppressed, understand themselves as the oppressed persons too, and start to fight in alliance with the others.

The defense of solidarity as a prerogative to promote a design with an anti-systemic perspective requires that we do more than just recognize that there is a problem, or worse, recognize that there is only a design problem. It is necessary to unveil the structures that engender situations of oppression, access the affected communities, and collectively build an identity of struggle, in order to contribute to the confrontation of the causes of the oppressive situation.

As Freire (1967) states, it is the critical insertion of oppressed subjects into a given reality that leads them to situated criticism and the desire to transform that situation, based on a lucid perspective of the historical and political context. The pedagogical character of liberation requires the commitment of the oppressed to overcome the situation of oppression to which they have been subjected.

In this way, revolutionary leadership understands the liberation process as a pedagogical process, but not without method. According to Pinto (1986), method is the intention transformed into act, it is the expression and materialization of one's own consciousness. The pedagogical experience of liberation occurs in co-intentionality, in contrast to a pseudo-participatory process.

We reject the notion of empathy in participatory processes because we understand it to be part of an anti-dialogical design practice. To explain this issue, we return to Paulo Freire. When presenting the theory of anti-dialogical action, which creates and perpetuates oppressions, he states that "one of the characteristics of these forms of action, almost never perceived by serious but naïve professionals, is the emphasis on the localist view of problems and not the view of them as dimensions of a totality". In this elucidation, we can consider that the notion of empathy confounds the understanding of the totality of oppressive situations and limits the agency of the subjects by concealing the dialectical character of the

structures of oppression, in this case in particular the class structure and, therefore, the monopoly of production that underlies the capitalist mode of production, which in the processes discussed here, has in the designer the subject that owns power and agency.

Solidarity, on the other hand, is part of a dialogical practice of design, where an alliance between subjects is possible in the unveiling of reality and in confronting situations of oppression. In this way, we can understand that there is a shared agency. This agency is, according to Fernandes (2016), a primordial element in praxis, the dialectical unity between theory and practice that enables movement amidst the concrete contradictions given by the situation of totality and by the design process inserted in this context. Through shared agency and in the collective exercise of praxis, the subjects develop capacity and motivation to seek a liberating and humanizing path, playing a dialectical role in relation to the oppressive structure between oppressed and oppressors.

Moreover, solidarity-based praxis is a process of self-transformation for designers through a real engagement with the dialectical contradiction inscribed by their position in the project and within systems of oppression. This engagement demystifies the designer as creator and problem-solver and, at the same time, enunciates the possibility of a critical consciousness about structural issues that define the need (or not) to generate any design solution.

#### **4. Two cases of alliance with social struggles in Brazil**

We present two experiences where we live in solidarity in practice while promoting design engagements in Brazil. The first is a design alliance with the collective Terra Firme in Belém do Pará, in the northern part of Brazil. Terra Firme works with multiple artistic expressions as a practice of resistance in a violent neighborhood. The other experience is an alliance with a popular education network within the feminist movement in Brazil. The Free Feminist University is an anti-systemic platform for political education that aims at thickening political consciousness within popular women and strengthening the feminist struggle from the bottom up.

##### ***4.1. Unveiling oppressions through design with the Terra Firme Collective***

An alliance process to overcome oppression has been promoted since 2018, through addressing design practices with a group of young people from the outskirts of Belém. The youth collective is dedicated to promoting social transformation in the periphery, through cultural actions in different artistic languages. It develops workshops, exhibitions, debates, joint efforts and campaigns in favor of peripheral youth and the valorization of Afro-indigenous ancestry. These young people suffer daily oppression from class, gender, race and sexuality. Social, cultural and economic opportunities are historically denied to this group, which is also the main target of the violence suffered by the periphery, driven especially by the dispute between the police and the militias over the drug market in the neighborhood.

With the advent of the new coronavirus pandemic, the peripheries of Brazil suffered from the rapid spread of the virus in parallel with the dismantling of the health system carried out by the Federal Government, represented by the neoliberal president Jair Bolsonaro. The lack of basic sanitation; the stocking of small houses; the suppression of demand for public health services, among other reasons, was the trigger for many residents of the Terra Firme neighborhood to be contaminated. The crisis in the periphery motivated young people to promote actions to combat the new coronavirus, including campaigns to collect food and hygiene items.

In a permanent solidarity relationship, remote design activities were carried out, joining forces in the fight against the pandemic through fundraising and income generation. Several artistic projects were developed and their results transmitted online, with wide reception from the public. Recently, face-to-

face activities have been resumed with the cooling of the pandemic and the increase in vaccination in Brazil. In this alliance for overcoming the challenges imposed by the pandemic, we understand that design practices that aim to raise engagement processes cannot be punctual, much less hierarchical. The structural complexity that generated the problem, against which the designer is invited to act, requires a deep analysis of the context that generates the problem, promoting an understanding of the situation of oppression. This process requires time and continuous engagement, transforms into political participation, and promotes the construction of a new reality.



*Figure 1 Collective of young people gathered before the pandemic to plan their future actions.*



*Figure 2 Campaign to collect food carried out by young people from the Terra Firme neighborhood. December/2020.*

#### **4.2. Politicization through feminist and popular education**

In the face of neoliberal advances and its progressive agendas appropriation, the political education action in social movements reaffirms its structuring role in the construction of political subjects in social

struggle. The Free Feminist University (ULF)<sup>1</sup> is a political education organization that operates in Brazil with a focus on the political education of popular women active in the feminist organized movement.

ULF was born as a Distance Education initiative in 2009, when this kind of dynamic was not usual in Brazilian reality. The challenge of addressing issues dear to feminism with popular women marginalized from access to technologies through a digital educative program has always been an emblematic issue in ULF's action.

In 2017, when I joined ULF through my militancy in the Articulation of Brazilian Women, a movement to which ULF is linked, we began to work with a perspective of hybrid courses and I could act as a local educator (working with classes of 20 women in person) and online educator (mobilizing discussion on platforms with a group of 150 women throughout Brazil). From 2020, with the pandemic, we returned to the online modality and currently ULF is going through a reformulation of its political and pedagogical project and is trying to respond to the needs posed by the feminist movements and their political organization. We discovered some clues for our reframed political orientation from a research conducted in 2019<sup>2</sup> (Branco; Lima, 2021), but it was from the experience of the articulation of the feminist movement during the pandemic, when many activities of the political organization against Bolsonaro's authoritarian and neo-fascist government started to be conducted in the online format, that we realized that our pedagogical focus should rest on popular women who need support so that they can assert their political leadership in this scenario. Thus, in the last two years we are mobilizing our educative efforts for accessibility and for political and instrumental discussion about the internet and the technologies in our lives and their limits and potentialities for the political organization of the feminist movement in Brazil.



Figure 3. In person activity, (re)construction of feminism story through lived experiences in 2018.

<sup>1</sup> The Brazilian translation is Universidade Livre Feminista, the acronym corresponds to this name.

<sup>2</sup> The research addressed the access and use of ICTs by popular women in the North and Northeast of Brazil and sought to identify how technologies empower or not the political organization of women in these territories. The research was published in Portuguese, English and Spanish and is available on the Feminist Free University website: [www.https://feminismo.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/In-the-Circles-and-on-the-Networks\\_digital\\_20maio2021.pdf](https://feminismo.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/In-the-Circles-and-on-the-Networks_digital_20maio2021.pdf)

Through this time, the designer's work with ULF was not involved in a single research interest or a specific project, but links the knowledge and interests of design and socio-material configuration to the praxis of feminism and popular education reflecting on the political-pedagogical process from practices and demands of the feminist movement. The main reflection for design and for the notion of solidarity is that in this engagement, the "design" project is not "by design", it is a pedagogical process in itself and engenders mobilization and politicization. This kind of experience involves design but is fundamentally multidisciplinary and questions what a design outcome is, who acts on it and for whom.

## 5. Final considerations

Solidarity can be recognized as a dialogical principle for design as it makes possible an alliance between individuals in the collective unveiling of reality and in the confrontation of oppressive situations. The praxis based on solidarity is a self-transformation process for designers by real engagement in the dialectical contradiction, inscribed by their position in the project and within the systems of oppression. By defending the notion of solidarity, we seek a reconfiguration of power relations within design spaces.

The critical approach to reality, which in Freire (1967; 2005) is part of the conscientization process, can be a key understanding for us to think about the design process as a possibility of alliance with the oppressed. In the critical unveiling of reality, in solidarity with the oppressed, the designer's action consists in collaborating for the transformation of the oppressive situation, and not in elaborating a commodity for a problem-solution purpose.

Freire (2015) denounces the neoliberal incorporation of emancipatory struggle principles. As an example, he comments on the category autonomy, which in the neoliberal perspective started to stimulate individualism and competitiveness. We can do the same exercise and think about the incorporation of empathy into design processes in a neoliberal context and what this means for the objectification of subjects and political erasure within the so-called participatory processes. Freire presents the notion of solidarity as a counterpoint to neoliberal co-optation logics and affirms that solidarity is a historical commitment for the emancipation of the oppressed and the oppressors.

In analysing the two experiences shared above, in contrast to the notion of empathy, we borrow Freire's suggestion and argue for solidarity as an ethical principle for dialogical and antisystemic practice in design. We believe that solidarity engagement in the unveiling of implicit oppressions in a design situation can be a starting point for processes of critical conscientization about structural issues that define the need to generate a "design" project. We also understand that participatory design approaches that are focused on commodity generation can serve as an instrument for alienation, both of the designer and the other participants. On the other hand, working to dismantle oppressive situations in an solidarity-in-praxis alliance can be a political experience of consciousness and reality transformation while designing.

Critical consciousness plays a primary role in combating the mismatch between thought and practice – praxis (Fernandes, 2016). In the effort to equalize these dimensions, we advocate solidarity as a principle and practice that is linked to awareness, recognition of reality, and the agency of transforming this reality. Struggle alliance against different oppressions should permeate the actions of designers interested in deconstructing hegemonic systems. The relationship between designers and oppressed groups should strengthen the weaving of ties in such a way as to make irrelevant the superficial commitment of design grounded in the concept of empathy. We believe that this can be achieved by sewing alliances through design processes grounded in solidarity.

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**Sâmia Batista e Silva** (she/her/hers) is a designer and professor at a public university in northern Brazil (UFPA). She is a PhD candidate in Design at ESDI/UERJ and co-founder of the Design and Oppression network. She started her career in advertising due to the lack of design courses in her hometown, Belém-Pará. She took a post-graduation course in Design in São Paulo and, back to her hometown, she started working with design for sustainability, fostering partnerships between big companies and community groups. In these partnerships, she developed a participatory design approach to strengthen associationism and cooperativism within the communities. She earned a Master's degree in Communication, Languages and Culture while researching mediation processes between designers and traditional communities in Amazônia. Her PhD research seeks to understand how design can contribute to the development of autonomy processes within cultural collectives that fight against social inequality in Brazil. This year she will also graduate as a popular educator from Unipop - Popular University Institute, in Belém.